GENDER EQUITY IN CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONS: A NEW INSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

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The construction industry remains the most male dominated sector in Australia. Despite three decades of formal gender equity initiatives by government and business, there is little understanding of why there has been little change to the hierarchical and numerical underrepresentation of women. Using a New Institutionalist perspective, more specifically Lowndes and Wilson's (2003) concepts of robustness and revisability, the nature and intent of formal gender equity initiatives, policies and practices are analysed through a single case study of a multinational construction firm. Through in-depth interviews with senior management and a documentary analysis of formal equity and diversity policies it is concluded that the robustness and revisability of policies, initiatives and practices are critical to achieving lasting change in gender equity in the construction industry, as is a focus on men as well as women and gendered practices in policy design.

Keywords: gender, policy, equity, diversity, new institutionalism.

INTRODUCTION

The lack of gender diversity in the construction sector is a persistent problem recognised in Australia and elsewhere, which exacerbates skills shortages, reduces productivity and constrains innovation (Toohey *et al*. 2009). Despite many reforms to increase the representation of women in construction, it remains the most male dominated sector in the country (EOWWA 2012). Women's participation has fallen from 17% of the Australian construction workforce in 2006 (ABS 2006) to just 11.6% in 2012 (EOWWA 2012). Women in construction not only fare poorly among technicians, trades, labourers and machinery operators (3%), but also in professional and management roles (14%) (ABS 2012). These figures are typical of many Western countries (Sang and Powell 2012). Gender segregation is horizontal and vertical, with men numerically and hierarchically overrepresented (Sang and Powell, 2012). Men dominate senior 'technical', 'fee-earning' careers, while women congregate in junior, support roles and non-fee-earning professions such as human resources and marketing. Early enthusiasm from women about construction professions and their own careers in the sector decreases with increased exposure to the workplace (Dainty *et al*. 2000). In Australia, women are leaving the construction professions almost 39% faster than their male colleagues (APESMA 2010).

Laws and regulations underpin the legal case for gender equity and diversity in Australia, including state and federal sex discrimination and harassment laws (Sang and Powell 2012). The federal government requires companies with more than 100

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employees to report on both the nature and composition of gender in their workforce (WGEA 2012). In 2013 the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) also introduced disclosure of diversity policies and reporting of gender targets for senior management positions for all publically listed corporations. Despite these initiatives, barriers to gender equity remain in many construction firms, including a lack of networking opportunities and challenges balancing work/family (Sang and Powell 2012). Further problems include bias and discrimination in construction company policies and procedures, informal recruitment and progression practices, and work which takes place during unsociable hours and in remote locations (Dainty *et al* 2000). The continued dominance of a culture which emphasises long hours and 'presenteeism' is problematic for many women (Watts 2007).

Given the intransigence of the gender equity issue in construction, a fresh approach to the problem is needed and the aim of this paper is to draw upon 'new institutionalist' (NI) theory to analyse the intent and nature of 'formal' policies and practices to attract, retain and support the progression of women professionals in the construction industry. This is an important contribution to knowledge since we need to understand formal policies before we can understand whether and how informal gendered rules and practices intersect with, and compete with, subvert or even substitute for formal policies (Chappell and Waylen 2013).

RECONCEPTUALISING GENDER EQUITY USING NI

Gender diversity research in construction remains theoretically weak. While research has recognised the existence of the problem and identified the industry's masculine culture as a factor in recruiting, retaining and promoting women in the sector, it has not yet clearly conceptualised the impact of this culture, or paid attention to the operation of informal rules in frustrating the effectiveness of the initiatives which are widely used by construction firms to bring about greater gender equity (Sang and Powell 2012). There is a need to advance the theoretical debate in this area to better understand the failure of formal policies to shift the gender imbalance.

To this end, the application of a NI theory offers a valuable new approach for examining gender diversity in the construction sector. NI has developed around four main perspectives: rational choice; historical; organizational (or sociological) and more recently; discursive (or constructivist) institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996). The basic premise shared across these perspectives is that organisational rules and procedures *"matter"* (March and Olsen 1984: 747) in defining and organising decision-making and action in and out of organisations (Lowndes 1996). Rules and procedures are devised by human beings to enable, constrain and shape the behaviour of agents – people, organisations and government (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). They are a product of human agency and are constructed through processes of negotiation, conflict and contestation (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Rules and procedures or 'institutions' outline acceptable behaviours and sanctions imposed if these behaviours are not complied with (Lowndes 1996; March and Olsen 1984). Rules and procedures may be both formal (e.g. legislation, policies) or informal (e.g. norms and practices. Formal rules are consciously designed and clearly specified' (Lowndes and Wilson 2003: 279) and disseminated and enforced through official channels (Helmke & Levitsky 2004).

The design of institutional rules is the result of multiple designers with different perspectives about their origin, nature and intent (Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Furthermore, policy designers face constraints and challenges in the creation and

implementation of new rules and procedures as organisations have the capacity to *"absorb or deflect new initiatives"* (Newman 2001: 28). Once designed, weak implementation or a lack of active maintenance and revision of policies will ensure that policies are ineffectual (Meyer and Rowan 1991). Founded on the understanding of the constraints and challenges associated with institutional design, Lowndes and Wilson (2003) suggest a twin criteria framework for good policy design consisting of 'robustness' and 'revisability'.

Robustness refers to the maintenance of policy strength and resistance to change over time. It is operationalised through: 1) clarity of values underpinning and being tied to policy design; and 2) the nature and effectiveness of policy enforcement, usually through sanctioning. Together a good fit between values and enforcement, help policies to 'stick' and shape organisational behaviour (Lowndes and Roberts 2013).

Revisability is the capacity for policy amendment or alteration, which is needed when a policy fails to achieve its objective. It is operationalised through: 1) flexibility and adaptation of policy design through policy learning over time; and 2) variability in policy design and the extent to which there is tolerance of different design variants in different locations (Lowndes and Wilson 2003). This is relevant to construction where policies often originate in head office and are implemented on-site.

METHOD

This paper presents preliminary analysis of the first phase of a larger research study examining gender diversity in the Australian construction industry. It uses a single case study approach to examine formal rules and their robustness and revisability. The single case study approach is frequently used both in organisational and policy analysis studies (Kanter 1977; Lowndes and Wilson 2003). While single case study research may not be generalizable, Flyvbjerg (2006: 223) argues that knowledge gained through case studies provides a highly valid and *"nuanced view of reality"*. Case studies are also important for testing theories (Patton and Appelbaum 2003), which is what we seek to do in relation to NI.

This study focuses on a privately owned multinational tier-one construction contractor, which operates in the commercial, residential, engineering and infrastructure markets. The company's structure is typical and representative of large construction companies around the world, being led and managed by a CEO and executive management team, which is composed of regional managing directors, legal counsel and strategy, safety, human resource and operations directors.

Data was collected through a documentary analysis of the company's HRM documents in relation to the attraction, recruitment, retention and progression of women and men. These documents included policies, strategies, and internal communications relating to gender equity, existing staff engagement surveys, employee performance and career progression planning strategies and pay equity analysis. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten purposefully sampled policy designers, HR managers and business leaders, including the CEO. The purpose of these interviews was to build a picture of the nature and intent of the gender diversity policies in use, and develop an understanding of how these policies were sourced, (re)designed, disseminated, measured and enforced within the organisation. Interviews were recorded with permission from participants and transcribed verbatim and anonymised to protect interviewee identities.

DESIGNING NEW GENDER DIVERSITY RULES

Interviews revealed that context for the design and development of gender diversity in the organisation within the last 4-5 years was triggered by management's concern about a talent and skills shortage in the sector due to the recent construction and mining boom period in Australia:

> *"It came up primarily because we were looking at constraints in terms of our staff and where do we get new good staff, how do we grow staff and we looked at a whole range of issues and… one bleedingly obvious one was,… half the population are female and we don't have anywhere near that in terms of our staff… we can tap into that – that can help."* **RESP #1, CEO**

> *"We've had some economic conditions that were interesting, first we had the GFC, so you know you could pick and choose what resources you wanted but not long after that….our business was heavily impacted by a number of factors including the mining boom…, so it almost like kicked you up the butt that you had to think shit load more about your people.* **RESP #3, Business Leader**

Policy development in this area also coincided with a heightened market awareness brought about by legislative changes to gender reporting and paid parental leave in Australia.

> *"There's been a lot of discussions and focus around women on Boards and the like, I think the more that's in the marketplace and just general industry, I think that helps to, you know, raise the awareness … where it definitely wasn't a prevalent topic, you know, some years ago."* **RESP #6, Business Leader**

Change appeared to be particularly noticeable to interviewees three years ago, with the appointment of a new CEO from within the Group, the introduction of an executive management team inclusive of a small number of women and a change in HR leadership:

> *"I think [the CEO] definitely has taken it on board and it's something that cascades from the top as a result."* **RESP #9, HR Manager**

> *"[The HR Exec Director] and the other women on the executive management team … they are the main agitators."* **RESP #2, Business Leader**

> *"Who really makes the difference - it will be the CEO and then the regional managing directors because they are the drivers - I suppose I have a very old fashioned, simplistic view …what interests my boss absolutely fascinates me. So my sense is unless things are being driven by those business leaders then it's not going to be in play."* **RESP #7, Business Leader**

Yet it was noted by *RESP #10, Policy Author and Business Leader*, that there was "variations of readiness" for policy development in this area within the executive management team. She stated, *"I think they're all ready, but I think some are here and doing it and others are trying to still get their head around what it is that they're doing, yeah, and why."* In terms of policy robustness, it could be argued that business imperatives and leadership, rather than company values, have underpinned gender diversity policy development in this organisation.

Interestingly, with one exception, all interviewees associated gender diversity with increasing the number of women both through recruitment and retention in the company:

> *"I think there's a pretty strong push in the industry and strong recognition that we've got to get more women in." RESP #4, Business Leader*

> *"Once we started that conversation then we – we did a fair bit of navel gazing as to well, for a start, how are we treating our existing, you know, female population and are they getting the same opportunities, are they being paid the same, are they – and that revealed some fairly interesting things." RESP #1, CEO*

Whilst interviewees identified that that the majority of their employees were men, they were overwhelmingly silent regarding the connection between gender diversity and men. They did not attach gender or gender diversity to men, but identified it as a problem for women (Lewis and Humbert 2010). This is interesting, as research has repeatedly acknowledged construction's masculine culture is holding back gender diversity (Barnard *et al*. 2010), yet the interviewees made no reference or link between masculine culture, high levels of male presence and masculinity in relation to gender diversity.

In the last three years, to improve gender diversity the company has applied a variety of formal policies and initiatives. These mechanisms were often sourced and developed internally by management or via external consultants. These included policies and initiatives such as parental and care leave, affirmative action towards women in graduate recruitment, pay equity reviews and corrections, gender bias training for recruiters, women support groups, mothers groups, establishment of a diversity policy and a gender diversity committee. Policies such as the code of conduct and parental and care leave respond directly to the company's legislative responsibility. Most of these policies and initiatives are tied to women, in contrast to other HR policies and initiatives such as flexibility and learning and development which are distinctively underpinned by the company's values. Identified in policy documents, the company values resemble: safekeeping, exceed, teamwork and honesty. The company values are set within a *"can do"* (*RESP #6, Business Leader*) culture which sits alongside its *"DNA"* or unique company identity which promotes loyalty of tenure, 'larrikinism', openness and humility. The company DNA has been built on a rich history which sometimes appears to muddle the company's values. It is also important to note, that while descriptors of values, DNA and culture may appear gender neutral on face value, a gendered dimension often underpins them.

The company has also pursued less direct initiatives and policies, such as diversity and gender bias training within management development training modules. It has commenced investigation around career pathways and transparent recruitment and progression practices within the company. Some initiatives have originated from focus group research in 2013 which explored employees' perceptions of gender equality in their business. This research identified a clear disparity between men and women's perceptions of the barriers and causes of gender inequality. The nature and inflexibility of the industry, the lack of women graduating from construction related courses and personal preferences or choices made by women were identified by men as key barriers to gender equality. Conversely, the dominant male culture, assumptions and stereotypes made about women and the lack of flexibility in the industry were identified by women:

> *"When we did … some dedicated workshops in each region with a group of males and females…We got … some fairly eye opening feedback about how differently things can be perceived … That was fed back to the executives and*

> *that – there's some things that really stand out for them. Some comments about girls playing with dolls and boys with Lego. Just some archaic type thinking that you're still unearthing from that whole piece. So then recommendations came through from that about the need to focus on career development and one up career conversations for females. "* **RESP #9, HR Manager**

The interviews reflected this in part, particularly in relation to the lack of women graduating from engineering and construction, and in the personal career choices women made with one interviewee advocating;

> *"We are still struggling with gender diversity because there are just not enough women in the market or coming through at a graduate level."* **RESP #2, Business Leader**

A key outcome of the internal research was a focus on flexible work practices within the organisation. Reinforced by results from the biannual company survey, which highlighted employee burnout and retention issues, a senior leadership group made flexibility their central project. Underpinned by company values and business principles, the group set out to establish a pilot on a new construction project where they aimed to meet program and six day production with company employees working a five day week. The pilot is considered critically important for the company and industry as a whole, yet in its introductory phase it has met with challenges associated to expectations placed on different site roles, particularly around responsibility and availability on site.

> *"It's game changing for the industry if we can crack it in a way that I think is meaningful ... They're struggling but we'll get there."* **RESP #10, Policy Author and Business Leader**

Interviews with management indicate that policies and initiatives are disseminated with the company using a top down approach, rather than locally designed initiatives.

> *"Same story and messages...get cascaded down from the national exec to the state exec to the project managers on the site and the project manager on the site then cascades that stuff down through his – his project team."* **RESP #1, CEO**

Within the company, enforcement strategies were not in place and their existence dependent upon future assessment of policy success or failure, which relied on informal conversations often between senior management and employees and employee surveys:

> *"We haven't ...I mean so far I think it's – all the conversations, the anecdotal evidence and some of the stats is suggesting that it –that there has – has been some momentum. So I haven't had to have a carrot or a stick and, you know, I – I think I'd have to address that one, you know, if – if we saw it trending that particular way."* **RESP#1, CEO**

ROBUSTNESS AND REVISABILITY

The work of Lowndes and Wilson (2003) suggests that the more robust and revisable the formal rules are, the more likely they are to become entrenched. Applying this framework to this tier one multinational contractor's gender diversity policies and initiatives, a mixed picture emerges. Table 1 summarises our perspective of how the company's policies align with the features of robustness and revisability framework.

It appears that the company has placed greater emphasis on revisability in policy design, whilst underplaying policy robustness. Policy robustness is operationalised through a clear tie to values and effective enforcement of policy. In relation to the policy documents reviewed, values are clearly underpinned by and are identified in some of the policies and initiative documentation, such as those associated with the flexibility and learning and development but are absent from policies associated with gender diversity, parental leave, remuneration and talent and succession planning. Enforcement of policies is not spelt out in the policy documents, with exception of the code of conduct which responded to legislation. From the interviews conducted, the pay equity policy whilst still debated has been enforced repeatedly by the CEO. The flexibility policy has been applied using a whole of project approach which changes the actual work practices on site, involving all employees. With regards to the remaining gender diversity policies, enforcement strategies were not detailed by interviewees and knowledge of what policies and initiatives are being followed and the nature of how they are being followed within the different company locations is poor. Self-enforcement of policies within the company appears limited.

Table 1: Robustness and revisability of company policies

Policy and Initiatives	Robustness		Revisability	
	Values	Enforcement	Flexibility	Variability
Flexibility (2)	●	●	●	●
Diversity (incl. gender) (7)			●	●
- Women's Group			●	●
- Mum's Group				
People	●*		●	
- Graduate recruitment			●	
Learning and Development (22)	●			●
- Diversity training			●	
- Gender bias training			●	
Code of Conduct	●**	●		
Parental Leave			●	
Performance (5)	●**		●	
Remuneration (4)		●	●	●
- Gender pay gap correction			●	
Talent and Succession (4)				●

(#) number of policies *in relation to flexibility only**makes reference but does not state values

Revisability is operationalised through the flexibility and capacity for policies to be adapted in response to learning from execution and through variable designs which respond to different locations and context. The company has undertaken extensive and ongoing learning via employee surveys and focus groups. Responses to these initiatives were taken and used to establish new policies such as flexible work practices on site, gender bias training for managers, exploration of company expectations associated with career pathways, investigation and adjustments to transparency around recruitment practices and pay equity analysis and correction. On the job learning from different groups across the business whilst highlighted as successful within the flexibility pilot, have been hidden by a lack of transparency between different regional groups. The company looked to use a moderate level of variability in policy design with a range of initiatives such as flexibility and pay equity

focused on reducing barriers to gender equity and which could be applied to different contexts within the business. The women's group which was initially designed as a support group for women within the business has evolved to include male managers, yet the focus still remains on women's experiences. From this preliminary study, it is difficult to gain a complete picture of the extent of policy variability across different contexts within the organisation. However, this will be more fully explored in the next stage of the research.

CONCLUSION

Although gender diversity in construction has been on the agenda of academics, government and industry for the last two decades, for our case study company and its management it has only recently emerged as a tangible issue deserving of action. New-institutionalism is not only useful for helping to explain why things stay the same, but it can also provide new insights for understanding how to achieve change. This is essential for developing new practical strategies to address the on-going gender imbalances in the construction industry. NI argues that good policies need to be robust and revisable in order to 'stick'. Policies that are unpinned by company values and are effectively enforced are robust. Polices which have been developed, adapted from lessons learnt and which are flexible in their application are revisable. At the same time, the policies which have been established focus overwhelmingly on women and revisability and are not particularly robust according to Lowndes and Wilson's (2003) definition. This is significant because the combination of revisability and robustness are both critical to embedding new rules and achieving change, in this case to gender practices.

This case study, although limited in terms of generalizability, illustrates how an NI framework can explain the lack of progress towards gender equity in the construction sector. Subsequent stages of this research will include comparison studies investigating the approach of other tier one multinational construction companies to formal gender diversity policies. We also acknowledge that individual formal policies and initiatives do not stand alone, but are embedded and intertwined in an environment with other formal and informal rules which both compliment or confound them (Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Good policy design therefore is not just about policy creation, but is an 'ongoing commitment to enforce rules, models of practices and rehearsed stories' (Lowndes and Roberts 2013: 171). NI argues that policy effectiveness therefore relies on human agency if it is to shift embedded or nested power relationships, particularly when applied to diverse contexts such as construction sites (Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Future stages of the research will therefore investigate the informal rules or practices and the narratives or story telling which exist and how these interact with the formal rules within our case study construction companies so as to understand the intransigent problem of gender inequality in construction.

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