Women in the Building Sector

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Introduction

With some exceptions, particularly in the east and except in times of war, women’s participation has remained extremely low in most construction occupations across Europe and equality has appeared elusive. Nevertheless, and challenging claims that women are not physically able to work in such a demanding industry, statistics reveal that they have always been present – including as bricklayers and carpenters, apart from in those times and places where they were systematically excluded, such as from these occupations in post-war West Germany. In many European countries there have also been consistently higher numbers of women undertaking vocational education and training (VET) courses in construction than are found in construction employment, indicating that many women do want to work in the industry but fail to obtain entry. But how are we to explain the exclusion mechanisms and how can the participation of women in construction be improved?

Whilst the employment of women in the European construction industry, employing 14.8 million workers and contributing to 10.4% of GDP, is consistently low, with average participation of 4–6%, there is significant variation between countries, from 2% in Greece to around 10% in Denmark, France and the Netherlands. In UK in 2014 around 11% of those employed in the industry were women, but only about 1% of these were in the manual trades, rather lower than nineteenth century levels (Clarke and Wall 2014; Clarke et al. 2015). In Austria, whilst women account for 11.9% of the whole construction workforce (including administrative, technical and professional occupations such as engineers and architects) (Schulz 2015). In contrast, 8.5% of all apprentices in the building and woodworking sector in Austria are women, particularly in carpentry and painting occupations.

Such statistics obscure a much more encouraging picture at local level, in terms of both participation and initiatives to change the situation, including by the construction trade unions. These provide insights into the obstacles entailed in improving participation and measures that can succeed. In the English Midlands, for instance, Leicester City Council Building Department has a long history of employing women, with 123 employed in 2012 as part of its 431 strong workforce and 18 female apprenticeships out of 75 (Craig and Oates 2014). In Denmark women in the age range 35 – 60 years account for around 70% of the total number of women employed in the construction industry over the last decade and 27% of unionised employed painters are women, representing a solid change (Pedersen 2015).
The trade unions have become more active in promoting women, signifying a departure from the findings of a 2004 survey of the European construction social partners’ gender equality agenda that, whilst expressing a ‘discourse’ of gender equality, corroborated rather than countered inertia and conservatism in policies, collective agreements and practices playing a role in women’s integration (Clarke et al. 2005). The UK Union of Construction, Allied Trades Technicians (UCATT) has, for instance, set up a Women’s Network Forum and publishes a newsletter *Women in Construction*. Whilst only 3.1% of the approximately 116,000 workers organised in the Austrian trade union of construction and woodworkers (GBH) are female, it was one of the first unions in Austria to establish a women’s department and it now organises a women’s trade union representatives’ conference every five years, a national women’s committee meeting at least twice a year, and regional women’s committees in four of the nine regions. Since 2008 special training courses are also offered annually for works councils and female members concerning legal and social problems, teambuilding, personal empowerment, psychological strain etc. (Schulz 2015). In 2014, on the initiative of the German construction trade union, IG-BAU, female members of the German, Swiss and Austrian construction unions (IG-BAU, UNIA and GBH) intensified transnational cooperation between women’s departments at a *Future Conference*, in which participants worked out the principles for a better, humanised world of work. Earlier, in December 2011, the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW) Congress approved a resolution recognizing the importance of a Women’s Network and its priorities, encouraging all the affiliated organisations to focus on the issues of gender and equal opportunities and to increase participation of female workers and women in EFBWW structures and activities (Lorenzini 2015).

**Barriers for women**

Various research studies have addressed the structural and cultural obstacles to the integration of women into the construction industry. These include inappropriate and poor working and employment conditions (especially long working hours), fragmented employment, discriminatory recruitment and selection practices based on word of mouth rather than qualifications, lack of work–life balance possibilities and also the persistence of traditional stereotypes and sexist macho attitudes (Clarke et al. 2004; Wall and Clarke 1996; Clarke and Gribling 2008; GLA 2007; Fielden et al. 2000; Sang and Powell 2013). Lack of state regulation and employer responsibility have also been found to play important roles, as well as the nature of the labour market and VET, difficulties in transiting from college to work, employer disengagement with training, and a decline in apprenticeships in many countries (Clarke and Wall 2014).

Above all, studies point to the impact of the nature of employment in the sector, as emphasised, for instance, by a Greater London Authority (GLA) study on diversity in construction (2007): ‘The prevalence of self-employment and temporary agency working (in particular of migrant workers) on short projects
on sites, often under different terms and conditions even on the same site and in the same trade, hampers the development of a stable workforce with clear paths of recruitment, retention and progression that a wider, more diverse, pool of workers can enter.’ (GLA 2017: 93–4).

Long hours working in particular is not only an obstacle to women’s participation, but the product of their historical exclusion from the world of work: ‘The long, irregular working hours and travel times often required in construction act to exclude many people from working in the industry due to the difficulty of combining work with domestic and other responsibilities. These work patterns underpin the preference for engaging mobile workers ... and hamper the development of a sustainable labour market.’ (GLA 2017: 94).

This GLA study of major projects, including Heathrow Terminal 5 (T5) and Wembley Stadium, recommended the promotion of ‘stable working hours and shorter travel times in conformity with Working Time Directive requirements, clean environment and transport policies, effective health and safety procedures and measures, and minimising disturbance to the general public’ (GLA 2017: 60). Surely these are also important considerations for men as well as women working in construction?

**Attempts to include women**

The size, complexity and nature of major infrastructure projects mean that they are often highly regulated and subject to scrutiny, opening up the possibility for a more inclusive employment policy, as well as a change in the composition of teams. A number of mega projects have set out to use their size, capacity and profile to make a difference to gender equality and set ambitious targets and aspirations as a prerequisite for action.

They indicate particular factors critical to the achievement of securing greater inclusivity, such as:

- securing an overriding agreement with all stakeholders, including contractors, subcontractors, trade unions, clients, and local authorities on working conditions, direct employment (e.g. Olympic Park – Wright 2013);
- contract compliance, including equality measures and employment goals in all tender documents, carried through by pre-job compliance meetings and continued monitoring (New York Times Building – Moir 2014);
- recruitment, setting clear targets, employing a workforce reflective of the local population, proactive application of equal opportunity policies by all contractors and subcontractors;
- training, including formal links with colleges in the vicinity, work placements and work experience (Vancouver Highway, Canada – Griffin and Braid 2000);
- working conditions, including structured working hours, childcare provision, and inclusive maternity leave;
securing support at senior level and from women’s groups and trade unions in meeting objectives and monitoring, and organising meetings and conferences.

As a result of implementing a number of these measures, women employed by Crossrail in London accounted for: 29% of project managers; 12% of apprentices and 19% of graduates (Kitching 2014). In Canada, women on the Vancouver Highway accounted for 5% of those employed and 10% of hours worked, including as carpenters, labourers and machine operators (Calvert and Redlin 2003). And, in the US, the New York Times Building (2004–7) had a 15% female participation rate (Moir 2014).

Much attention has been given to the implementation of Human Resource Management policies, including creating supportive networks, flexible working, and mentoring. Nevertheless, research has revealed that those initiatives do not significantly affect women’s overall career advancement, although they do provide a happier and more family-friendly work environment (Francis 2015). Indeed, factors that positively influence the career progression of women in construction are the same as those for men, including the organisations worked for, education and qualifications, work experience and hours worked.

**Current changes in the construction industry**

Changes taking place and required by the industry open up the possibility for greater inclusivity. In particular, the imperatives for low-energy construction, to increase renewable energy and to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 20% by 2020 (the construction sector being responsible for 40% of European Union (EU) CO₂ end-use emissions) are a great opportunity. The EU Build-up Skills programme has emphasised the need to improve the quality of training courses in many countries to meet the requirements for pan-European ‘nearly-zero energy buildings’ (NZEB) and renewable energy targets. It noted the shortage of cross-occupational knowledge and skills, insufficient coordination between occupations and unsatisfactory interdisciplinary training opportunities (Cliquot and Gausas 2014: 26). NZEB is qualitatively different from the traditional construction process in requiring a singular approach to the building envelope by all occupations. It emphasises insulation continuity, treatment of thermal bridges and targeted air tightness. For on-site occupations, this means going beyond their immediate scope of responsibilities and understanding the building fabric as a unified system. This suggests greater educational input to achieve thermal literacy, broader qualification profiles to overcome interfaces between the activities of different occupations, and integrated team working and communication given the complex work processes involved. The imperatives to improve energy efficiency can thus be seen as at odds with a labour process often characterised by fragmented contractual relations, extensive subcontracting, use of agency labour, and self-employment and as offering new opportunities to open up the industry to a wider range of candidates and at the same time to transform the VET system.
Many countries in Europe are also confronted by what might be regarded as a recruitment crisis in the construction industry, marked by a failure to expand the pool of candidates, to attract high calibre applicants, and an aging construction workforce. Of those who enter construction training, many are on full-time courses, suggesting greater reliance, on one hand, on recruiting directly from vocational colleges, where generally higher proportions of women are found than in the labour market, and, on the other hand, on the provision of work experience and placements. The employment relation itself has also been undergoing transformation, including through the use of agencies, so that the ‘old boys’ network’, on which much recruitment depended, is weakening. More formal recruitment practices, which give greater recognition to qualifications achieved and are more favourable to women, are also increasing. Finally, the EU and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) policy gives an added impetus to increasing the participation of women in construction, including the gender dimension of the 2020 Strategy and policies for gender equality.

**Conclusions**

All these changes imply a transformation of the construction sector and a reform of existing norms within the male workplace to encompass sustainable construction, stable employment, workforce education and training. The danger at the moment in efforts to increase female participation is that too much onus is placed on women to change the situation and that purely economic arguments are resorted to, especially those built into the ‘business case’ such as concerning skill shortages, so pushing the role of men in the industry to one side. These arguments obscure the real problem confronted, which is political, the need to change power relations. Equity can never be achieved through the efforts of women alone, but, only with active support from men. Ultimately, it is the construction industry that has to change to accommodate women, not the other way round, and the time is ripe for this, to the benefit of both men and women.

**References**


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