

# DEMOLISHING GENDER STRUCTURES

*Omesh Jethwani Government Projects and Programs Manager interviewed Natalie Galea (PhD Candidate/Research Associate, Faculty of Built Environment, UNSW) on the UNSW report on Gender Inequality in the Construction Industry.*

## What triggered the birth of the research report?

The research was triggered by a drop in the participation numbers of women in construction over the last decade. The construction industry is the most male dominated sector in Australia: in 2016 women represent only 12% of the workforce, a decrease from 17% in 2006. Among professional and managerial roles, women represent 14% of staff. Men dominate senior 'technical', operational careers, while women congregate in junior, support roles and non-operational professions such as human resources and marketing.

Early enthusiasm by women about construction professions and their future careers in the sector decreases with increased exposure to the workplace as they experience relative disadvantage and inequality in pay, development and promotional opportunities compared to their male counterparts. These experiences take their toll with women leaving the construction professions almost 39% faster than their male colleagues.

The research focused on construction professionals – women and men – employed by large construction companies. We took 'construction professionals' to be the group of people that design and manager construction projects. For example, project directors, construction managers, site managers, project engineers, design managers etc.

Our research project aimed to investigate why existing formal policies and strategies to attract, retain and support the progression of women professionals in large construction companies have failed to achieve gender equality and diversity.

We chose to focus our attention on larger construction companies as they are typically at the forefront of policy innovation and they employ a higher percentage of women construction professionals than small-medium sized companies. We do acknowledge



*Demolishing Gender Structures in Construction Research Launch at Australian Human Rights Commission (UNSW researchers (left to right) – Prof. Louise Chappell, Dr. Adam Rogan, Natalie Galea and Prof. Martin Loosemore)*

however, that the majority of construction workforce is in fact employed in small-medium sized companies.

Our team of five researchers – Dr. Abigail Powell, Prof. Louise Chappell, Prof. Martin Loosemore, Dr. Adam Rogan – were supported under the Australian Research Council's Linkage project funding scheme, as well as by Loughborough University (UK), the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Diversity Council Australia. We are extremely thankful to the construction companies that supported our research and in particular, to the women and men we shadowed and interviewed; without them, there is no research.

**The report was launched by Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins on 7 December 2016. Tell us more about the launch day and the views from the audience.**

The Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, a partner on our research project launched our findings in front of 100 people from industry. The research team presented our findings and recommendations on the barriers to women's recruitment, retention and progression.

During the time of the research, the companies made strides in addressing the gender pay gap. Companies also offer a suite of policies to support gender diversity including, childcare rebate provisions and paid parental leave.

Construction has changed but according to participants in our research, it still has a long way to go. We found a varied degree of understanding, readiness and ownership of gender diversity amongst business leaders and managers. Despite project leaders and line managers playing a central role in the careers of employees there is reluctance to take responsibility for gender diversity initiatives, undermining their effectiveness.

Our research team was struck by how existing construction work practices were having a negative impact on men as well as women. Practices of long hours, presenteeism and total availability undermine men's health and wellbeing. If the construction industry can improve conditions for male workers, this will improve the conditions for female workers too.

The launch also featured an industry panel that discussed what initiatives were working, and what initiatives were more challenging to implement.

The panel included representatives from Lendlease and Multiplex and Australian Rail Track Corporation. Lendlease and Multiplex described how they are experimenting with change.

Lendlease, for instance, has leadership and mentoring courses for women, a parental return-to-work program and a "wellbeing day" once a quarter that is offered on a use-it-or-lose-it basis.



UNSW Research team with the Sex Discrimination Commissioner – (left to right) Prof. Chappell, Dr. Rogan, Natalie Galea, Dr. Powell, Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, Principal Advisor to the Commissioner, Alison Aggarwal, and Prof. Loosemore.

Multiplex has piloted a five-day workweek and some job sharing so that employees get three Saturdays off a month and a lieu day to be taken up during the month.

The Australian Rail Track Corporation told the audience about its profound success hiring women in traditional male blue-collar rail roles. More about the ARTC approach: <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-23/women-on-track-recruitment-drive-boosts-number-of-women-work/8141212?pfmredir=sm>

Acknowledging slight improvements in the last few decades, audience members expressed frustration at the exclusion of women and the sector's tolerance of sexism.

The audience were particularly interested in different ways to address gender inequality in the industry. As the research demonstrated; there is no silver bullet. A variety of approaches are necessary to address what is a complex issue.

#### How was the research carried out?

The research was conducted between 2014-15 in a number of major construction companies. The research involved documentary analysis of company policies and initiatives directly and indirectly impacting on gender diversity; interviews with 21 senior business leaders; participant observation of 14 company events and ethnographies of six construction project sites.

Ethnographies involved two researchers – a man and a woman, one was a construction professional and the other an academic – shadowing 44 construction professionals for 2-5 days to observe work practices, as well as 61 interviews with professionals on site about career pathways.

All data has been anonymised to protect the identity of participants.

#### Were the targeted group of a specific age group, gender, marital status, employment status?

We shadowed and interviewed men and women from age 20-60, a range of marital status, sexuality, and full-time / part-time workforce.

#### In your opinion, are the current work practices a contributing factor to the decline of female employment in the building and construction industry? If yes, which ones should be abolished and which ones could be improved on?

Yes, current work practices are a major factor in the decline of women in the building industry as they affect all three areas – women's recruitment, retention and progression.

In recruitment, the research pointed to the practice of informal recruitment – both into companies and onto project teams – from a narrow education 'pipeline' against an informal criteria based on 'cultural fit' or candidate 'potential'. Potential is hard to measure.

In 2016 women represent only 12% of the workforce, a decrease from 17% in 2006

The research also found that informal recruitment practices that relied on the candidate 'knowing someone in the company' undermined women's recruitment into the industry because the process of recruitment was gendered and not transparent.

We recommend companies look at their recruitment practice and criteria. Another suggestion is to initiate recruitment drives specific to women who are not from the traditional pipeline and provide them construction training.

In terms of retention, there were several work practices that stood out as undermining women's retention in the industry.

Firstly, due to social norms outside of construction, women still do the bulk of care work – of children, elderly parents etc. Adherence to rigid work practices; particularly presenteeism, long hours and total availability make it very hard for women to combine a construction career with a family.

Rejection of job sharing, part-time work undermines efforts to retain women in construction. It also needs to be noted that





Dr. Abigail Powell, taking questions from the audience of 100 industry representatives at the launch.

one of our key findings was that these rigid work practices are not working for men either.

We found that men in construction were suffering from stress, anxiety and very poor work life balance that resulted in marriage breakdowns, health problems and suicide.

Secondly, parental leave continues to be a major barrier to women's retention even after the introduction of formal parental leave practices. In practice, parental leave carries a stigma and is perceived as an actual and a real cost.

Women are left to strategise and negotiate their departure, return and career survival. There is little recognition of the cost on women's pay equity over their career and their career progression.

The third work barrier to women's retention is the tolerance of sexism. Unlike safety hazards that are routinely acknowledged and corrected, the research found that people will routinely walk past sexist graffiti, or not blink an eye at sexist comments. This work practice makes construction an exclusionary work place for women where they are reminded subtly and overtly of their gender and difference.

For many women, the tolerance of sexism is exhausting and frustrating. The research team recommended to demonstrate a 'no tolerance' of sexism – sexist wording, drawing and behaviour in the work place.

We also suggest that if there is more than one woman in the company, put them on the same construction site, rather than separating

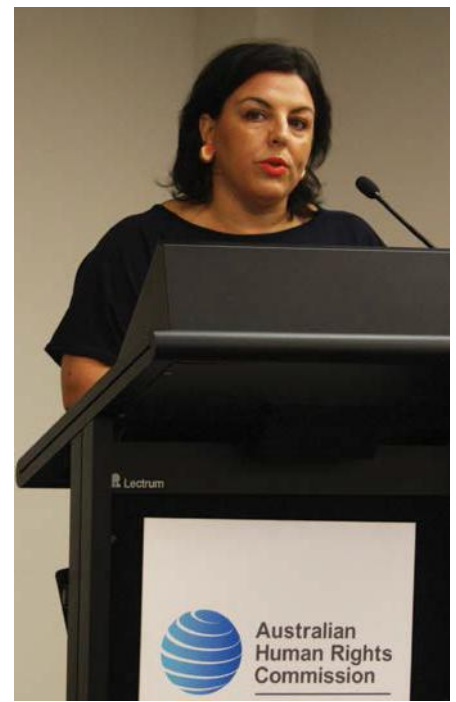
them. In terms of rigid work practices, we suggest companies test out job sharing, attempt to standardise work hours, monitor fatigue, and remove Saturday work.

Culturally, we suggest that companies stop rewarding and promoting excessive hours and 'shaming' those who do not comply. In terms of parental leave, companies get on the front foot and plan early including maybe the introduction of staged return to work for parents. Set up projects with gendered diversity in mind – plan for flexibility, wellbeing and parental leave of all employees.

Finally, in relation to women's career progression in construction the research found that women's capability is frequently questioned, singled out and discussed. By contrast, men's capability was assumed. Women needed to better, not equal men. Actions to address gender equality were viewed by men as providing women with an unfair advantage. Yet the research found that in relation to progression, this was not the case. Due to a lack of transparency around progression and promotions, men formed strategic alliances with other men to get ahead.

These strategic alliances were habitually closed to women. This gave men greater opportunity to develop skills and showcase them to senior management, aiding their career progression. Additionally, women were directed into 'feminised' career paths such as commercial or design roles and this reduced their progression opportunities.

Our research recommends that promotion processes and criteria's are made more transparent.



UNSW Researcher Natalie Galea presenting findings on why women leave construction careers

Additionally, establish a formal sponsorship program for women in low to middle management. Sponsorship is about advocating on someone's behalf and providing them with access to the skillsets and opportunities they need to further their career.

#### **What other methods can be implemented to assist organisations in improving the intake of women in the Building and Construction Industry?**

Focusing on women's recruitment is only part of the equation. Organisations need to also look at what is affecting women's retention and progression. To date, much focus has been on women rather than on construction's work practices, many of which are taken-for-granted and avoid scrutiny. It would be interesting to see what might change if government decided to put gender on the tender, like they have with safety and quality.

#### **What is your prediction for the Building and Construction Industry for 2017?**

Unless there are changes to the work practices, I can't see any change to status quo happening in 2017, or anytime soon for that matter.

#### **Is there a link our readers can access to attain a copy of the full report?**

[www.be.unsw.edu.au/research/demolishing-gender-structures](http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/research/demolishing-gender-structures)