

Women In The Built Environment: Why Don't Women Want To Join The Sector

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Summary

The construction industry is continually challenged due to the skills deficit throughout the sector. This is currently impacting numerous projects throughout the UK including the housing programme, HS2 and significant infrastructure upgrades. Women only represent 13% of the built environment and whilst this number has increased since the Equality Act was implemented in the UK in 2010, the sector still needs to encourage more women to join the sector. This paper discusses why women do not want join the industry, how women can improve the construction sector and some of the methods that can help do this such as flexible and remote working, culture changes and implementing key frameworks.

Keywords: *Talent management, women in construction, women in management, skills shortages.*

Track: Gender-in-Management

Word Count (excluding tables and references): 1985

1. Introduction

Schouten (2017) explains there are a total of 27 million people employed within the UK, with an approximate 50:50 split between both genders however, Barnes (2019) explains that the construction industry is represented by less than 13% of women due to a multitude of issues relating to poor gender equality throughout the sector. Whilst there have been various initiatives to improve the workplace for women such as Women in Construction and Engineering awards (WISE Campaign, 2020), Dare to Be Different (D2BD, 2020), International Women in Engineering Day (WES, 2020) and support networks such as the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC, 2020), the sector still struggles to encourage women to join the built environment. Hussain *et al.*, (2021) displays that initiatives such as this as well as the Equality Act 2010 should improve equality within the workplace and

help fight against discrimination, the gender pay gap and poor working conditions for women, but there are still issues that affect the construction industry from bridging the gap between men and women.

2. Literature Review

Many industry professionals such as Naoum (2020), All Parties Parliamentary Group (APPG) (2017), and Stevenson and Farmer (2017) understand the importance of encouraging women to join the construction industry, not just to improve the skills shortage deficit but, to create a new dynamic and bringing new ideas to the sector. However, Tessema *et al.*, (2013) explains that an employee's job satisfaction is paramount to ensuring that they remain in their job and helping improve the business and sector that they work in. It affects most individuals due to the substantial part of their lives spent at work and as such businesses who lack employee job satisfaction throughout their company suffer from poor performance, absenteeism, and turnover. There are a multitude of issues that deter women from the construction industry including; a 'mans world' culture, flexible working, discrimination and glass ceilings preventing women from progressing (Naoum, 2020).

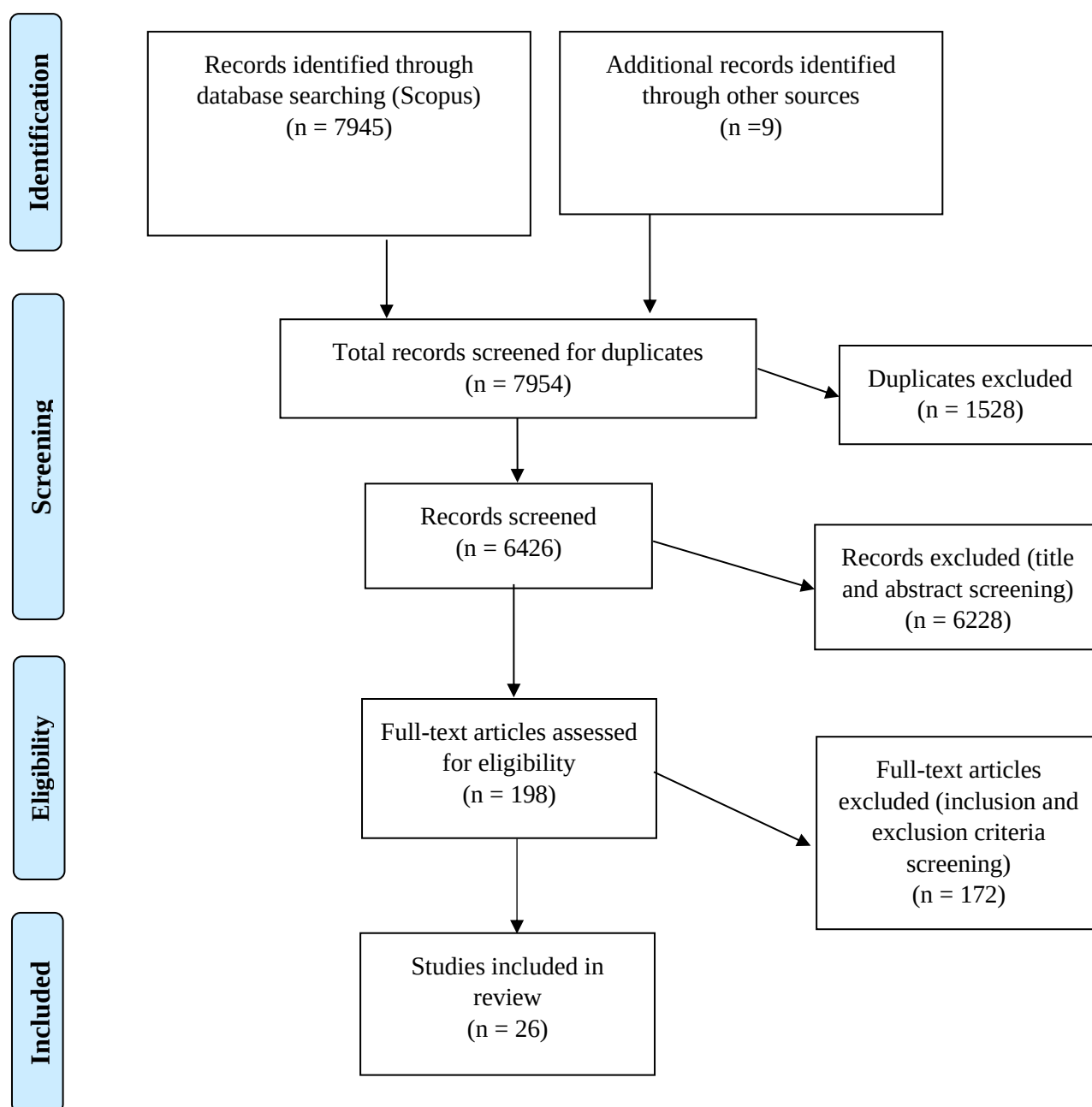
One particular subject area that women suffer poor job satisfaction is poor culture that can also be described as a 'man's world' within the construction industry. Toor *et al.*, (2017) explains that the factors that affect women appear to be similar globally and cross over ethnicities and cultures and Aboagye-Nimo *et al.*, (2019), further confirmed that 40% of the women within the construction industry admitted to being bullied, 30% revealed they were too afraid to make a complaint and a staggering 51% of women alleged they were treated poorly purely because of their gender. Within the construction industry Naoum *et al.*, (2020) feels that its reputation as a low-status industry with hard and inflexible working conditions, strictly defined working hours, and a persistent 'laddish' culture in a white, male-dominated environment prevents women from joining the built environment.

McKinsey (2020) reveals that given the enormous challenges mothers are facing at work and at home, two things should come as no surprise: Many mothers are considering downshifting their career or leaving the workforce. Anderson *et al.*, (2019), believes that there is a common theme regarding senior management and the lack of women being able to rise through the hierarchy. Companies appear to have invisible processes where assumptions about men and women, femininity, and masculinity, are embedded and reproduced, and gender inequalities continue and lead to occupational gender segregation and results in gender pay gaps. In addition to this, Hodnett (2019) explains that upon analysis of the top five construction companies in the UK, there is a severe issue with gender inequality where only one company had an equal number of Directors. All companies within her study admitted that it was going to take a while to ensure gender equality was 100% throughout the organisations and further confirmed that there are current issues with unequal bonuses paid to each gender. Further to this, Hodnett (2019) found that female respondents thought they would struggle to gain promotion within their organisations and improved working conditions such as maternity, flexible and remote working and equal pay are essential. It is evident that women in the construction industry are important, bringing new ideas whilst being part of a wider team. Therefore, it is essential that the sector improves talent management strategies, enhance frameworks to help retain the small number of women that are employed by the sector and attract more women to join the built environment.

3. Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to explore the issues that surround women in construction and how resolving this issue could help decrease skills shortages throughout the construction sector. The first stage covers the collection of secondary data using a systematic literature review approach using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA). The systematic review approach was developed to collect the available data, filter it according to the credibility of the sources, to analyse the filtered data to determine its overall effect and finally, to disseminate the data based on its effectiveness (Higgins and Green, 2011). Moher *et al.*, (2015) explains that detailed, well-described protocols can facilitate the understanding and appraisal of the review methods, as well as the detection of modifications to methods and selective reporting in completed reviews. This study uses a mixture of literature by using peer reviewed journal papers and government strategies to understand the current outlook of the construction sector.

Figure 1: PRISMA diagram



The steps followed for the systematic literature review proposed by Tranfield *et al* (2003) and are as the following:

- Formulation of the review question.
- Identification of keywords and search terms based on scoping study, the available literature and researchers' suggestions.
- Identification of the most appropriate search strings.
- Compilation of a full list of information search outputs of all articles and papers reviewed.
- Incorporation of studies that meet the inclusion criteria as specified into the research.

Search Process and search term generation

A search of databases including Scopus and Google Scholar were used and further to these reports from industry bodies and professionals were reviewed to ensure a full review of industry literature was used to enhance the research. Titles including one or more of the search terms: Women in construction, talent management, construction skills shortages, talent retainment, construction skills deficit and drivers or benefits. The searches took place in January 2024, covering all years of publications from 2010. Figure 1 displays the PRISMA diagram displaying that 7945 were initially screened by Scopus and an additional 9 documents were sourced. 7954 were screened for duplication which removed 1528. Once all screening was complete 26 studies were used for this study.

Literature Review Question

A well identified and constructed research question guarantees a focus on the research scope and avoid unrelated searching and limit the risk of turning the literature review process into one that is significantly large and non-systematic. Petticrew and Roberts (2006) argued that breaking the review question into sub-questions ensures a better framing and formulation of the question. The Population, Intervention, Control, and Outcomes (PICO) model is a tool that can be applied in this case.

Table 1: Systematic literature review process

Acronym	Definition	Description
P	Population	Construction business, bodies and the UK Government
I	Intervention	Government and construction body strategies
C	Comparison	Strategies vs reality of the construction industry
O	Outcome	What is the outlook of the sector?

The developed literature research question is as follow: **Why don't women want to join the construction sector?**

Identification of inclusion/exclusion criteria

The selection process relied on a thoroughly specified benchmark to select relevant primary studies (Ali and Petersen, 2014). Hence, the inclusion of: Papers that we believe contribute to the body of knowledge on women in construction; Papers that are from peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, government publications or construction bodies; and the paper is written in a language other than English were excluded.

4. Results and Conclusion

It is widely recognised that there is a huge skills deficit throughout the construction industry and it is essential that the built environment finds a way to reduce the skills gaps to enable the sector to continue to build and maintain key construction projects. To do this, the sector must find methods to encourage young adults, greater Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) representation and women to join the construction industry. Studies show that improved diversity will help improve productivity, construction programmes and bring new ideas to the built environment, however, current industry literature shows that the sector must improve culture and working conditions. This will help enable women to flourish and enjoy their roles in the sector as the APPG (2017) and Naoum (2019) reveal that the UK Government and construction businesses need to collaborate and provide greater flexible working hours, better working practices and mental health aid to employees, especially women who are dealing with the extra burden of childcare and domestic responsibilities, alongside work. In parallel with this, a framework to help women in construction to be able to maximise their potential and remove the glass ceiling to enable individuals to obtain promotion into senior roles must be implemented, which will increase diversity within board rooms assisting with key decisions to improve the sector as a whole.

5. Strengths and Limitations

This study reviewed why women do not want to join the construction sector and how improvements within the industry can be improved to reduce the skills shortage. This work is critical to the industry as well as many other researchers' work. However, relying on a systematic review as a search strategy involves the risk that valuable published sources and articles are excluded due to being deemed as out of the scope strategy, therefore due to a lack of published evidence, articles and statistics have been used to support the published evidence. Only publicly available databases and full text available articles were searched and reviewed. Additionally, conference materials were also excluded from this review but there has been some good material that are published in conferences. This potentially omitted valuable published materials which may have been vital to this study. However, most conference papers are further developed and published in peer reviewed journal papers.

6. Future Research Development

Further studies should concentrate on how the UK Government and the construction industry can encourage and retain women to join the construction industry. A framework needs to be developed that can be continually developed as more women join the sector and reduce the skills deficit.

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