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Abstract

The issue regarding lack of women leaders in construction has been a prominent concern for many years because women in mainstream management reduces potential managerial skills shortage in the industry and increases women's interest for construction related occupations. This paper is based on a study, which was designed to identify the role of women in leadership positions in the UK construction industry and the barriers confronting their careers. A literature review has been carried out followed by four case studies that were developed around four female leaders in the industry in order to identify the role and the barriers confronting them. Results of this study revealed that role of women leaders in construction is yet to be improved both in terms of number of leaders and the significance of their role. However, the findings of the case studies show that the majority of women leaders do not find problems in their leadership ability and the recognition which is received, however working in a site environment brings additional inconveniences to women in performing their role as leaders. Further the study revealed that women leaders in construction face career barriers which prevent them from advancing towards leadership positions. The results from the case studies indicate that the task of balancing family and work commitments, childcare problems and old boys networks are the most common barriers encountered by women in leadership positions in construction.

Keywords: Barriers, Construction industry, Leadership, Women

1. Introduction

This paper is based on a study, which aimed to identify the role of women leaders in the UK construction industry and the barriers confronting their careers. In identifying the role of women leaders, the study attempted to examine the duties and the job satisfaction of female leaders,

their leadership styles, characteristics and abilities and the significance of their leadership in terms of number of women leaders in the industry, the extent of contribution and their positions in the organisations. The study also explored the experiences of female leaders in order to identify the barriers confronting their career in leadership positions. Since the examination of barriers is an important step for developing women leaders in this industry the research study was structured to identify the areas of obstacles from organisational and personal dimensions by considering the perspectives from women leaders and their co-workers.

Accordingly, the following section of this paper provides a background to the study addressing the role of women leaders in the UK construction industry, their leadership styles, the determinents of leadership styles in construction and barriers confronted through a literature review. The subsequent section describes the methodology adopted to collect and analyse empirical data of this study followed by the findings and the discussion. Conclusions are given in the final section of the paper.

2. Background

2.1 Women leaders and the construction industry

According to Vinnicombe and Singh [1] senior women are rare in many male dominated companies, so that many women managers have few role models. According to Kanter and Burke and McKeen, more feminine ways of managing may be included in the acceptable behaviours for future senior roles by female role models in the organisations [1]. A survey carried out in the UK construction industry shows that the ratio between male and female management staff is 6%:94% [2]. In the "managerial and administrative category", in the construction industry, women are concentrated in specialist positions (including personnel and public relations) rather than mainstream management [3]. When women in managerial positions are dis-proportionate in organisations, they become more vulnerable as well being in a minority [4]. Increased access of minorities has been identified as an effective way of changing the existing culture of the industry, in order to overcome its various problems including lack of women, as acknowledged by many construction professionals [2]. Improving women's participation in leadership roles will enhance the rights, freedom and opportunities of women [5] in the industry.

Helgesin [6] argues that women's central involvement in managing households, raising children and juggling careers gives them a capacity for prioritisation in a leadership role that men typically do not possess. Women generally, possess feminine characteristics like emotional, sensitive, expressive, co-operative, intuitive warm and tactful nature while masculine characteristics such as being aggressive, independent, objective, logical, rational, analytical and decisive are commonly associated with men [7]. Although feminine characteristics are the most commonly associated qualities with women, Korabik [1] found that women in leadership positions were higher in masculinity than the general population. Grant [8] suggests that as women move up the corporate ladder, their identification with the male model of managerial

success become evident and some of the women mangers consequently reject even the few managerial feminine traits they may have earlier endorsed.

However, It has been found that female leadership tends towards a style defined as 'interactive leadership' and women adopt more democratic and participative leadership styles, [9]; [10] that involve: encouraging participation; sharing power and information; enhancing self-worth; changing self interests for an overall good; relating power to interpersonal skills; and believing in better performance when feeling good.

However, the nature of an industry and its characteristics are extremely influential in determining the most effective leadership styles for it. According to [8] especially, issues about the gender of leaders cannot be fully understood without reference to organisational culture. Not only culture but socialization within the society and the workplace, nature and demographics of an organisation, gender and gender ratio of the industry also influence leadership styles [6]. In considering leadership styles, the unique characteristics of the construction industry such as project characteristics, contractual arrangements, project life cycle and environmental factors can have an impact on leadership styles in construction [11]. Since construction is a project-based industry it creates temporary multi organisations with extensive team work that has a significant impact on leadership behaviour of managers. Cleland [12] argues that project leadership should be appropriate to the project situation because leadership is a continuous and flexible process.

2.2 Career barriers to women leaders

The literature on women in construction identifies that women have progressed slowly and have confronted a greater number of barriers in their development than their male counterparts. Previous studies found that although there is no discrimination in formal announcements, some of the construction organisations have differentiated pay levels for men and women in leadership positions. According to the Employment Service [13] it was identified that full-time non-manual women workers earn less than 60% of that paid to their male counterparts in the industry. In addition the informal networks and cultures that are male-dominated often become barriers to women's progression. Most importantly the corporate inequities in advancement opportunities and rewards discourage women from seeking top management positions. It was also found that women are less frequently offered rotational job assignments to areas that are on the revenue producing side of the business, which ultimately decreases their chances for promotions to top management of the organisation [14].

After mining and quarrying, the construction industry is renowned for its male dominated culture. According to Powell et al. [15] engineering in the UK has a popular image of being tough, heavy and dirty and these powerful cultural images have helped to reproduce occupational segregation whereby engineering is perceived as unsuitable for women. In many instances male senior executives and professionals have old boys network which have shared experiences between themselves [16]. Therefore women find it difficult to fit into this atmosphere except in appendage roles. Furthermore the prevalence of gender stereotyping and

the incidence of sexual harassment also remain major threats to women especially for their career development into senior managerial positions.

Women are given tasks which are intended to test their ability to work in a male environment [3]. This is a challenge especially to those who are interested in developing their career in construction. Some researches found that, refusal to carry out such tasks led women to be accused of incompetence and be seen as a legitimate target for further harassment. In certain instances this became a black mark for their future offers. However poor performance in these tasks led women to reinforce gender stereotypes and jeopardise their chances of acceptance for their promotions. Female managers emphasised their personal qualities as critical factors in their career such as, capacity to hard work; integrity; desire for responsibility and positive attitude [3]. Due to barriers created within them and from the external environment women lack confidence and assertiveness to go for positions of power [17]. Their reluctance to compete for senior jobs is a major barrier created by them. In addition, their lower aspirations and inappropriate expectations [18] hinder their careers in leadership positions in senior management.

Although most female students are continuing to perform well in studies, their choice of educational field segregates them from the field of construction. Their educational segregation limits their access to higher level construction related courses, which require formal qualifications. This seriously undermines their opportunities to enter the construction industry at a managerial or professional level. Their entrance into lower levels or into middle level at later stages of their career, affects their progress towards leadership positions.

Most importantly the construction industry fails to consider the issues associated with women's commitments towards job and family life [19]. The long hours of work required from senior managers to actively participate in the management is incompatible with women's domestic responsibilities. In addition to above, the time, duration and location of the meetings sometimes create role stress to women. Women have felt that they are the only or one of very few women attending the meetings [20]. In addition, women's commitments to child care and elder responsibilities prevent them from carrying out these tasks. This challenge of balancing the career and the family is a major barrier for their career advancement and women's career break due to maternity is a blow to their advancement. Some women even drop their job, do not take any interest in developing them or do not take an interest in promotions.

3. Methodology

Case studies were selected as the most appropriate research strategy for this study because it is considered that case studies provide the opportunity for studying real-life phenomenon in detail without any control over it. Four case studies, which were developed around four female leaders representing different disciplines within the construction industry (Table 1), were carried out in order to achieve the aims of this study. The unit of analysis of the case studies was decided as the individual leaders because on them only the conclusions were drawn at the end of the study.

Table 1: Case Studies

	Description
Case Study A	• She is the Assistant Director of Estates and Facilities Division of a public body, which is attached to a university hospital in England. Her division looks after the management of estates, property, facilities and construction projects of the hospital and these responsibilities direct her to deal extensively with different teams. • She is in her early fifties, married and mother of two children who depend on their parents.
Case Study B	• She is the Financial Director of the UK's northern wing of an internationally wide construction company. Her main responsibility is built around managing company accounts. All financial related issues of the company including accounts of their construction contracts are handled by her subordinate staff. • She is in her mid thirties, single and expecting her first child.
Case Study C	• She is an Associate Architect in a well established architectural design firm in the North of England. Her responsibilities range across a broad spectrum, i.e. design to contract administration. She has to interact with different categories of people including subordinates of project architects, designers and technical staff as a leader and also with clients and building contractors. • She is in her late thirties, married, mother of two young children and expecting her third child.
Case Study D	• She works as a Site Quantity Surveyor on a construction site, located in the North West of England. Her employer is an internationally reputed large construction company. In contrast to the other three cases, she does not have direct subordinates under her according to the organisational hierarchy but she has to get some work done through the assistant site quantity surveyor and influences sub contractors and site workers in certain circumstances. • She is in her late thirties, married and mother of four children where the eldest is employed and not a dependent on her and her husband.

A detailed study was carried out on each female leader's career, career progression, leadership style and ability, and the barriers faced during their career progression. Views regarding the selected female leaders' leadership and her career difficulties were obtained from their superiors, peers and subordinates to gain an overall perspective. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the leaders, their superiors, peers and subordinates in order to collect data on the leaders' careers, career progression, their leadership styles and ability and, the barriers confronting their career towards leadership positions.

Further, the Personal Attribute Questionnaire [1]; [21]; [22] which was developed by J.T. Spence, R. Helmreich and J. Stapp in 1975 was used in order to assess the personal

characteristics of leaders. There are twenty-four items in this questionnaire each measuring one personality characteristic. There are eight questions on socially desirable instrumental traits generally associated with males, eight questions on expressive traits which are known to be associated with females and the remaining on androgyny traits, the characteristics of combined male and female qualities. All these items are presented in a five-point bi-polar format with a masculine label at one end and a feminine at the other [1]. The questionnaire was given to all four female leaders and asked to indicate the extent to which they possess each of the eight masculine characteristics, each of the eight feminine characteristics and each of the eight androgyny characteristics on the 1 to 5 scale.

In addition to the interviews and the questionnaire, organisational documents such as organisational charts, employment records and other relevant documents of the respondents' organisations were studied in order to understand the positions of respondents in the organisational hierarchy, their duties, roles and number of female employees in the organisations.

The data collected through the semi-structured interviews was analysed using a three step process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. A data matrix was produced by tabulating the interview data; the respondents are listed as columns and the questions as rows for data display. This system makes it easy to identify patterns in the responses. Two data matrix were constructed in order to analyse the data gathered from the interview. Firstly single site matrix were constructed using information from each case. Secondly cross site matrix were constructed using information from different cases in order to compare and analyse the experiences of women leaders across different cases [23].

The questionnaires were analysed by adding the scores on each item of a particular set (masculine, feminine and androgyny) together and dividing by eight. According to the set of attributes, which scored the highest average among above three, the nature of personal attributes of a particular leader was decided.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Leadership of women managers

According to the interview data, women leaders of all four cases admitted that they perform all the duties which have been prescribed to their designations. They have never felt that their roles were under-estimated except in the experience of case D leader about misusing her skills for some clerical work in the absence of the site secretary. These leaders were satisfied with their roles and they are confident with their skills and competencies whilst they all agreed that they have to learn more through experience.

Further, all four leaders perceived leadership as an essential and critical skill for their career advancement. Leaders of case A, B and C, believed that their leadership style depends on the situation to be tackled and the people who are to be dealt with and perceived themselves as

more democratic styled leaders. The leaders in the first three cases, who were in higher positions in the organisations and whose work was not based on construction sites, were confident about their leadership ability and believed that they receive the recognition and acceptance from their working environments. The superiors, peers and subordinates irrespective of their gender were extremely positive about these three leaders' leadership abilities and agreed that they do not have any problems in their leadership. Similarly, the leaders did not think that their leadership is undervalued compared to male managers' leadership. However, they all disclosed that they need to have a thorough knowledge on their subjects, they have to be familiar with the culture of the organisations and they have to possess internal organisational knowledge to be successfully accepted as leaders.

In contrast to the other three leaders, the case D leader possessed a negative attitude about her leadership ability and the acceptance and the recognition she receives from her site working environment. She was not confident about her leadership skills and believed that it is harder for women to gain the necessary respect as leaders in the construction industry.

According to the data collected through the Personal Attributes Questionnaire, leaders of case A, C and D possessed more feminine attributes and the other leader perceived herself as a more masculine personality. A close relationship between the self-perceived personal attributes and the nature of the leaders' careers could be seen through the questionnaire findings. Apropos, the case B leader, whose self-perceived personal attributes are more masculine, had a similar career to a male leader because she had lesser family commitments with no childcare responsibilities and she hadn't had any career breaks as yet.

4.2 Confronting barriers to women leaders

The difficulty in balancing the family and work commitments is a more frequently quoted barrier within the study. Although women and men want a successful career and a happy family, it has been a difficult task in finding the balance between work and family life for them. Since women generally perform a large share of household tasks, this has been found to be a major barrier for women in continuing their job career. Three case studies show that women in leadership positions who have families are confronted with difficulties in balancing their family and work commitments. However the case B female leader from a construction contracting company, who does not have family responsibilities or any dependents, didn't consider the task of balancing her commitments as a barrier to her career. She did acknowledge the difficulty of balancing work and family commitments for women leaders.

Child care is one of the important aspects in family commitments that needs time and priority. Three of the female leaders from this study stated that they have faced difficulties with regards to child care. It has been noticed that the importance which women give to their child care and the adequacy of child care facilities has had an effect on women's careers. Case C female leader who is from a consultancy firm, while explaining her career she said that she would have moved up in her career faster but it was hindered due to distractions by having children and maternity leave. However her commitment towards work through working from home and making few

visits to the work place during the break helped her to progress to a higher level. She also mentioned that in addition to women's commitment to continue their career, the understanding between the employer and female employees has significant effect on their career continuity. Although generally women take larger share of child rearing activities, one of the subordinates of case B leader said that it is also`a problem to men, as nowadays men also take the responsibility of child caring. However he stressed the importance of improvements in child care facilities to facilitate both men and women to progress in their careers.

The old boy network is found to be another common barrier in the construction industry since it is a male dominated industry. Among four female leaders, two females from construction professions have faced problems with old boys network. According to female respondents, when women attend meetings or events where there are no other women or very few women they generally find it more uncomfortable and which sometimes leads to their lesser contribution towards decision making specially in executive meetings. This ultimately affects their promotion and advancement opportunities.

In addition the culture of organisation has a significant impact on those who work within it. An inhospitable culture within construction organisations is one of the most significant barriers to women's advancement and also a major factor in diminishing their satisfaction in work. It has been mentioned as a mitigating factor by the case D leader who works in a construction site. However case B female leader who comes from a different discipline has not felt any difference with regard to the culture in her work division though she is from a construction company. Further, one of her subordinates who is also from the same discipline, when explaining his view about the culture of his work environment said that they are sheltered by their professional background as they have an equal number of women and men. However he recognised that in construction there are probably more hurdles to cross for women due to the nature of the people who work in the industry.

Stereotyping can have an influence on the way in which men and women are perceived in the workplace. Among all four cases, the female leader who works in the construction site has experienced this difficulty. The use of stereotypes as the basis for assessment can result in dissatisfaction in work. When case D female leader from the construction site explained about her experience on site said that it is harder to get respect for women in construction. In addition it was found that women face problems when they give instructions to get the work done. However this is often noticed in construction sites.

The industry wide practice of working long hours is seen as a barrier to women. However three of the female leaders commented that the flexible working hours and home working are a great advantage to them. In addition they stressed the importance of better understanding between superiors and women in their view. According to the female leader from the construction site, when work is judged based on the number of hours worked then women face problems unless proper facilitates are provided to overcome them. Although she has recognised the need to work for long hours on a regular basis she found it difficult to challenge this.

In addition to the female leader from the construction site who realised the need for better working policies for women, case B leader recognised the difference between policies in construction and other sectors. She said that very minimal facilities are given in construction, such as minimum legal requirement for maternity leave. Furthermore a lack of female leaders in higher positions in the organisation leads to difficulties in obtaining the required facilities or allowances as certain facilities are not in place before a need was recognised. Gaining the knowledge regarding the policies which can facilitate them to continue their job career while giving importance to family life as well was also mentioned.

In order to obtain views of others about the barriers faced by women interviews were conducted among superiors, peers and subordinates of the female leaders. However most said that their female leaders do not face any difficulties. Interviews were conducted among male peers of female leaders who were considered for the study in order to understand their views on barriers faced by them during their career. However in contrast to female's perspectives about their own barriers, male employees stated that they didn't face any problems.

5. Conclusions

The findings of the literature revealed that there is significant under-representation of women in the managerial positions in the construction industry, especially in mainstream management. However, according to the case study findings, women's leadership was highly appreciated by their superiors, peers and subordinates in the organisations and they did not see any problems of women being leaders as far as they have the necessary skills and competencies. Apropos, the case study findings of this study illustrated that women leaders in construction make a significant contribution to the industry.

As the literature illustrates, it is believed that women possess more democratic styles of leadership. This was confirmed by the case study findings of this study because all the female leaders perceived themselves as more supportive and understanding in their leadership. Although the literature says that there is a tendency for women to adopt more masculine attributes when they move up their career ladder, the results of the case studies did not prove it. However, a close relationship between the self-perceived personal attributes and the nature of the leaders' careers could be seen because the leaders who had close career characteristics to male leaders perceived themselves as having more masculine characteristics.

The case studies revealed that the female leaders who were in the higher positions in the organisational hierarchies were extremely confident about their leadership skills. It can be stated therefore that the level of authority a leader possesses has a significant influence on the recognition and the respect received.

The results reflected that the difficulty in balancing family and work commitments, childcare problems and old boys networks are the mostly mentioned barriers encountered by women in leadership positions in the construction industry. In addition female leaders mentioned that the unfriendly environment when she is the only female in the meeting or event also leads to career

problems. It was noted that women working on a construction site also encountered more problems. However the barriers encountered by women in leadership positions and its extent differ from one discipline to another although they all work in the construction industry. Further the study found that employees who work with the female leaders expressed that there are no problems to women leaders. However some recognised that there are problems which still prevail in a few segments of the construction industry. They expressed that this situation will change with time while recognising the need for more women to the industry.

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