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Dominant Factors Hampering Full Participation Of Female Contractors In The South African Construction Industry

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of this paper

This paper analyses the experiences of female contractors in the South African construction industry in order to identify dominant factors hampering their meaningful participation in the industry.

Design/methodology/approach

Structured questionnaires and focus groups were used as the main data collection instruments. A purposive sample of 2 145 grade 2 – 6 female contractors was drawn from women-owned construction entities of Gauteng, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga provinces that are registered on the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) database.

Findings

The findings identified various factors that hamper development and meaningful participation of female contractors in the construction industry in South Africa. Participation of female contractors in the industry remains limited. Current legislation, strategies and programmatic interventions utilized by government entities to facilitate transformation of the industry to embrace and accept participation of women; has not yielded the desired results.

Research Limitations

A purposive sample of 2 145 women-owned construction companies was obtained from the CIDB register of contractors in categories 2-6, selected from three provinces only, namely; Gauteng, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga.

As this research was restricted to experiences of female contractors, further surveys need to be conducted with women in built-environment professions and women in construction trades to provide information for a more comprehensive and comparative analysis of the status of female

participants in the construction industry.

Practical implications

According to the 2011 statistics from the CIDB register of contractors, women-owned construction entities constituted 48% of the total number of registered construction companies. This study has drawn attention to the fact that participation of women in this industry is hampered by factors that can no longer be ignored. Political-will is not enough. A more rigorous approach is required to effect meaningful change.

The value of the paper

The study has highlighted that empowerment legislation, programmes and strategic intervention designed to empower women in the construction industry in South Africa must be backed up with industry-specific legislation to bring about meaningful transformation in this traditionally male-dominated industry. Women empowerment must be institutionalized in order to be effective.

Keywords: Construction, Women Empowerment, Transformation, Gender Policy, South Africa

1. Introduction

The South African government's vision for the country is that of an adaptive economy characterised by growth, employment and equity. To meet the needs of all people and their enterprises in a sustainable manner, the South African economy must build on the full potential of all persons and communities across the length and breadth of its country. However, vast racial and **gender** inequalities in the distribution of and access to wealth, income, skills and employment persist. As a consequence, our economy continues to perform below its full potential (Department of Trade and Industry (SA), 2007).

Like other progressive countries of the world, South Africa recognises that no economy can grow without providing opportunities for all its citizens to participate actively in the mainstream of its economy. Historical disparities in this country made it necessary for the government to introduce legislation that would facilitate transformation and thereby create an enabling environment for participation by previously disadvantaged individuals (pdi's), including women (the historically disadvantaged - hdi's).

In traditionally male-dominated industries such as construction, special programmes and strategic interventions were introduced to empower those that are already participating and to encourage entry of new participants. In fact, the Commission for Gender Equality commented in 1999 that mining and construction were two industries with little prospects to offer to the empowerment path of women. At the time there were apparently only 84 women (7%) participating in the construction sector, mostly involved in cleaning, horticulture and catering services. The comment presented such a challenge to the Minister of Public Works, Ms Stella Sigcau, that in 2001, she launched a "Strategic Empowerment Initiative" for Women in Construction - with a 30% participation goal (Sigcau, 2001). By 2003, there were 330 (10%) female-owned emerging construction enterprises on the department's database. Currently (2011), the CIDB database boasts 48% (4 839) female-owned enterprises, an increase of almost 1 366% in eight (8) years. Efforts introduced by the Minister in 2001 to facilitate entry of female contractors into the industry yielded extraordinary results.

However, the CIDB register of contractors shows that the majority of these entities are still in the lower grades. According to Table A (CIDB) below, 45% (2 190) of registered women-owned entities are still in grade 2, 52% (2 500) in grades 3-6 and 3% (149) in grades 7-9. A registered contractor's grading designation (indicated in the first column below), means that the contractor is considered capable of undertaking a contract less than or equal to the value indicated in the second column - within the contractor's registered class of works.

Table A: Tender Value Range

DESIGNATION	Less than or equal to	Women-owned entities (2011)	
		No.	%ge
1.	Involved in EPWP		
2.	650 000	2 190	45.26
3.	2 000 000	650	13.43
4.	4 000 000	853	17.63
5.	6 500 000	567	11.72
6.	13 000 000	430	8.89
7.	40 000 000	130	2.69
8.	130 000 000	17	0.35
9.	No limit	2	0.04
	Total	4 839	100

The above table shows that less than 50% (a mere 130 to be precise) of the 330 women-owned construction companies that were registered on the department's database in 2003 are capable of undertaking contracts from R 13 to R 40 million. This constitutes only 2.69% of the registered women-owned entities! According to Menches and Abraham (2007) the reason why women encounter problems in construction vary from difficulty in balancing family and career life to slow career progression and attitude barriers caused by male dominance. This is supported by Madikizela (2008) who asserts that the industry is under-utilizing the full range of skills and talents in the population because of continuing unequal opportunities for some groups within society.

Current evidence suggests that there are still discrimination challenges that women face on a daily basis, but expressed in less visible ways. A series of studies revealed that many women in high-level positions in corporations and firms believe that social exclusion, not just overt discrimination, is a barrier to women's career advancement (Welle & Heilman, 2005). In order to minimize or cope with this problem, attitudinal change by both men and women is strongly recommended Enshassi, A, Ihsen, S, Al Hallaq. (2008).

Barrier to entry into the South African construction industry is no longer an issue, as corroborated by the number of female-owned entities registered with the CIDB. Transformation of the construction industry to provide opportunities for full participation by female is considered painstakingly slow. Sex-disaggregated data and gender-responsive analysis continue to reflect imbalances and multiple barriers to the empowerment of women, gender equality and equity. Legislative reforms introduced to empower women seem to have yielded subminimum results on the empowerment of female contractors. Despite well-documented economic successes and the availability of a broad range of state policy, strategy and programme interventions aimed at overcoming economic disparities; entrenched inequalities continue to characterise the South African economy and act as a deterrent to growth, economic development, employment creation and poverty eradication (DTI)(SA), 2007).

Thus, this study seeks to identify obstacles to meaningful participation of female contractors in the South African construction industry.

2. Research Method

The study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods. Structured questionnaires coupled with focus groups were used to collect data. The respondents to the questionnaires included female owners and directors of construction organisations. Focus group meetings were held with the questionnaire respondents in order to obtain more complementary information on the subject.

The questionnaires comprised both closed and open-ended questions, designed to establish the profile of respondents, types of operation, skills levels, experiences, bottlenecks and problems as well as availability and effectiveness of support structures available in the construction industry for female owned contractors.

The questionnaires were piloted prior to being distributed in order to check the respondents' understanding and ability to answer questions. These were then distributed electronically to e-mail addresses provided through the CIDB database of Registered Contractors.

The survey was delimited to the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng provinces. a purposive sample of 2,145 grade 2-6 female owned contractors was drawn from the CIDB database.

The Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng Provinces were selected for the study because they have a higher population density per square kilometre than the national average. of the population density for South Africa is 39 persons per square kilometre while that of Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Eastern Cape is over 39 persons per square kilometre (Answers.com. accessed 17 November 2010). Therefore it was considered that the research would provide a general picture of the country. However, the results may not be generalised to all the regions of South Africa as conditions may differ.

A total of 301 female contractors out of 2,145 responded to the survey, representing 14% of the target population. The low response may be attributed to the fact that emails were sent to all organisations that appeared on the CIDB register and some organisations may have stopped operating. The CIDB register is not updated regularly. Considering the rate of business closures in South Africa, it is estimated that at least 50% of firms on the CIDB register, may not have been actively involved in the industry and would therefore not have had an interest to participate in the survey. Consequently the percentage of those who participated in the survey may actually be as high as 30%..

Data from the survey was analysed using SPSS to output descriptive statistics. The results are presented as means, standard deviations, frequencies and rankings in the findings sections.

3. FINDINGS

Data analysis involved inspecting, cleaning, organising, transforming and analysing the data quantitatively, using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

3.1. Profile of respondents

The analysis revealed that the majority of the respondents (56%) did not have formal construction education, but wanted to be economically independent and felt a passion for hard work and for construction. 62% operated from home, 76% owned a computer but only 36% was found to be computer-literate. The survey further found that an astounding 56% of respondents had never been employed in a construction company before while only 20% had been employed for longer than 5 years before starting their own business. The range of experience of the respondents varied from 1 year to 19 years. Rightfully, Women speak, (2010) believe that women deserve a visionary educational and training framework that enhances their participation in the professional or vocational sectors of their choice. This needs one to conclude that challenging the norms of gender associated with 'feminized' or 'masculinised' careers, occupations and industries, and opening doors to women to access relevant and affordable training is linked to real employment prospects.

Due to the high percentage of women who have never worked in the construction arena or a construction company before, an average number of years in the industry were not calculated.

3.2. Experiences, bottlenecks and problems

All respondents indicated that they were highly dependent on sourcing work from government, but that access to opportunities offered was limited due to sexual harassment, discrimination, nepotism and unfairness that are so prevalent in procurement procedures. These practices made it extremely difficult for them to secure work. Davis, (2006) correctly asserts that since the democratic elections in 1994 in South Africa, the constitution and a further series of laws has banned discrimination and demanded employment equity - this includes a prohibition on gender discrimination and the promotion of gender equity in the workplace. But for many women there has been little change.

Haupt & Fester, 2012 cited bureaucratic systems and procedures within the public sector as a definite hindrance to female contractors achieving their goals of being economically independent. This was exacerbated by their lack of requisite marketing skills to solicit work from the private sector.

Other major constraints to participation were found to be exploitation by main contractors, which mostly took the form of not being informed when contracts are awarded even though they participated in the tendering processes. Sometimes these contractors would find reasons to exclude female contractors from being part of the project/s. What was most disheartening was the lack of support from industry role-players such as government and state-owned entities, who would turn a blind eye to such practices. It was also found that female contractors employed more male than female workers, confirming the stereotype that male workers were much suited for hard-core construction work than their female counterparts.

The ratio was found to be 2:1. This is in line with a study conducted by Haupt & Fester in 2012.

When asked about factors that affect their performance, the respondents strongly indicated that access to finance and working capital were major hindrances, resulting in lack of continuity of work and poorly trained workers. Although the industry is inundated with various training programmes, these were generally found to be ineffective as most of the respondents still indicated a dire need for training in the areas of technical, business, financial and marketing skills. Apparently, needs assessments are generally not carried out and as a result, most of the programmes are not designed to meet the needs of the beneficiaries. They are a 'one size fits all'.

Lastly, organisations that purport to represent women were viewed as having an agenda which benefited only office bearers.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This research concluded that indeed the current status of female contractors in the construction industry in South Africa is not representative of what the country desires. Although the well-known and well-documented issues of discrimination, harassment, lack of finance, lack of opportunities and lack of technical-managerial-business skills were cited as major factors hampering active participation of female contractors in the industry, these are merely the result of the construction industry's non-compliance with the country's transformation agenda. Although Cabinet adopted South Africa's National Policy Framework on Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (NPFGE) in December 2000, there is no evidence of its utilization by the industry. In fact, a survey report by the National Department of Public Works (SA), 2007 revealed that all provincial departments of public works utilised legislative reforms and programmatic interventions for empowerment of female contractors and that this was ineffective and was not achieving the desired results. Most construction industry role-players also confirmed that they did not have a women-empowerment and gender policies within their organisations. The objective of the NPFGE was and still is to urge national departments and other relevant industry role-players to develop sectoral gender policy guidelines that would translate national imperatives for women's empowerment and gender equality into their sector policies, programmes and activities; a deliberate strategy designed to ensure that industry role-players prioritise the government's agenda on gender empowerment, equality and equity. These policies would address gender-specific issues such as stereotypes, attitudes and incorrect perceptions that the generic legislative reforms were not designed to deal with.

One report concluded that non-compliance with Millennium Development Goal 7 – Target 9, constitutes a serious omission which may seem to endorse discriminatory practices. MDG7 – Target 9 addresses the

elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Establishment of appropriate enabling sector policies is essential to moving towards equity. A random search for sectoral Gender Policies in South Africa revealed that only the Department of Justice complied with the requirements of the NPFGW by creating a comprehensive departmental gender policy in 2001.

There is therefore an urgent need to advocate actions that will bring about a meaningful change to this lamentable state of affairs. Women empowerment needs to be institutionalized and not be treated as “something at the end-of-the-day” business (Office of the Status of Women 2002). This will provide a strong basis for equality and equity for women in the construction industry. Women will no longer negotiate or participate from a position of weakness, but will be empowered to participate at an equal level with their male counter-parts.

The National Department of Public Works should therefore be urged not only to create and operate a relevant comprehensive gender policy, but to also ensure that all construction industry role-players comply with this imperative. These policies must be coupled with comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems that would feed into a rigorous reporting mechanism to be designed by the Ministry of Women-Children-and-the-Disabled.

In addition, the Department would need to:

- i. Investigate the possibility of developing a Construction Bank. Investigating existing models such as the Chinese Construction Bank and the model of the previous Agricultural bank of SA (prior to 1994)
- ii. Facilitate the development of relevant training programmes designed to empower women in the industry
- iii. Facilitate the development of training programmes designed to expedite acceptance and solicit support for women empowerment in the industry.
- iv. Re-examine its procurement processes and procedures to ensure compliance with best-practice
- v. Set up systems to address prejudices and stereotypes within internal tender adjudication processes.
- vi. Apply set-asides for projects to be executed by female contractors and professional services rendered by female professionals.

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