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**Isomorphic forces and their effects on gender gap in Australian project-based organisations.**

Marzena Baker

School of Management, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane Australia  
[m9.baker@hdr.qut.edu.au](mailto:m9.baker@hdr.qut.edu.au)

Dr. Erica French

School of Management, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane Australia  
[e.french@qut.edu.au](mailto:e.french@qut.edu.au)

Dr. Caroline Hatcher

Graduate School of Business, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane Australia  
[c.hatcher@qut.edu.au](mailto:c.hatcher@qut.edu.au)

## **Isomorphic forces and their effects on gender gap in Australian project-based organisations.**

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper demonstrates that strong isomorphic forces contribute to the ongoing female underrepresentation in project-based organisations in Australia. Through a qualitative study of career experiences of women project managers, the underlying structural barriers to their career progression in construction and property development organisations are examined. The barriers appear as unique to project-based organisations and include project work practices; lack of career paths for project managers and limited organisational commitment to gender diversity. The Australian project-based organisations must purposely foster their female project managers to overcome isomorphism and thereby bolster their productivity and stay competitive on a global scale now and into the future.*

Keywords: human capital dimensions of project, lived experience of project work, temporary organising, gender.

### **BACKGROUND**

In Australia, a large and growing number of organisations organise work through projects and, as a result, have the ideal organisational structures to deal with fast changing business and economic environments (Crawford, French & Lloyd-Walker, 2013; Goldman Sachs, 2009; Hatcher, Linger, Owen & Algeo, 2013). However, the project-based organisations in the construction industry, one of the largest contributors and employing sectors of the Australian economy, not only are experiencing declining productivity but also a growing skills shortage, which may be partially due to the low participation rate of women (Chaaserio & Legault, 2010; Crawford et al., 2013; The Australian Trade Commission, 2015). In fact, the construction industry has the lowest participation rate of women, drawing predominantly on only half of the country's population for its workforce (Workplace Gender Equality Agency [WGEA], 2015). Women are not only underrepresented in executive manager roles, they are also underrepresented in junior and mid-level positions. This high degree of horizontal segregation characterised by uneven distribution of occupations (Blackburn, Browne, Brooks & Jarman, 2002) is evident in women comprising only 15.4% of all employees in the

construction industry. With only 2.9% of CEOs and 11.7% of managers, representing high levels of women's underrepresentation in the executive suite, there is also a high degree of vertical segregation indicating that higher status and paying jobs are mainly occupied by men, leading to limited opportunities for career progression for women (Blackburn, 2002; French & Strachan, 2015; WGEA, 2015). In addition, the construction industry has remained in the bottom three industries (out of 19 industries reported) for female directors since 2004 and in the bottom five for executives since 2002 (WGEA, 2014). Furthermore, the gender pay gap in the Australian construction industry is higher at 20.1% than the country's average at 18.7% (Goldman Sachs, 2009; WGEA, 2014).

Workplace gender equality has been identified as one of the solutions able to help address the challenges of low participation of women in the workforce. The focus on improving 'the productivity and competitiveness of Australian business through the advancement of gender equality in the workplace' has been high on the government's agenda (Conway, 2012, p.15). As project management continues to expand into the future it is important to understand how this different form of organising affects women's career progression and how it contributes to female underrepresentation in those organisations (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Crawford, Lloyd-Walker & French, 2015).

### **Unique structure of project-based organisations**

The literature suggests that project-based organisations are distinct from traditional organisations in their structure and nature (Davies & Hobday, 2005). They conduct their core operations in a series of projects, and by temporary work arrangements (Bredin, 2008; Davies & Hobday, 2005). The project-based careers face limited organisational assistance with career development and are highly reliant on project managers forging their own career paths (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Hölzle, 2010). Shenhar and Dvir (2007) suggest that those challenges are further emphasised by a lack of career development opportunities, training and status within organisations, which don't allow project managers to progress their careers into leadership roles.

The path to leadership is also different to that found in traditional organisations. Hölzle (2010) argues that in some project-based organisations, the project teams and project managers are

only regarded as temporary organisational forms and in such organisations the project members have to cope with a permanent employment uncertainty. As a result, many project managers treat their positions only as stepping stones, aspiring to often more traditional and permanent general management positions (Parker & Skitmore, 2005; Pinto & Kharbanda, 1997). However, according to Hölzle (2010), the move from a project or program director role to a board role has not yet been established in most project organisations.

Further, the traditional masculine work practices, deeply regulated by gendered patterns and bias, and based on the masculine conception of work, have been proposed as an explanation for the low representation of women in projects (Chasserio & Legault, 2010; Legault & Chasserio, 2012). The literature suggests that the ongoing reproduction and maintenance of masculine conceptions of work based on rationality, efficiency, control and devotion to work create a professional standard that represents significant challenges for women (Chasserio & Legault, 2010; Legault & Chasserio, 2012; Lingren & Packendorff, 2006; Powell et al., 2006). In addition, the masculine logic embedded within the profession and exemplified in the Project Management Institute's (PMI) PMBoK® Guide (Project Management Book of Knowledge) exerts a strong influence on the management styles in those organisations, creating challenges for women in sustaining legitimacy of their capabilities, and therefore progressing to leadership roles (Buckle & Thomas, 2003; Thomas & Buckle-Henning, 2007).

Due to increased responsibilities in family caring and less flexibility for working long hours, women are often scored lower on their commitment to their profession and viewed as lacking job dedication, reliability and professionalism, leading to fewer promotion opportunities, and less opportunity for career progression (Evetts, 1998; Gerson, & Jacobs, 2001; Chasserio & Legault, 2010; Watts, 2009). Accordingly, they are unlikely to be chosen to take part in challenging projects and be promoted to higher posts, and therefore miss out on opportunities to acquire new skills and build their reputation, all things necessary for career advancement (Evetts, 1998; Legault & Chasserio, 2003).

Scholars suggest institutional theory as the means to explain the complexities of

organisational practices and behaviours (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Milliken, Martins & Morgan, 1998). According to the institutional perspective, organisations within the same organisational field tend to become isomorphic or homogeneous in structure, processes and behaviours (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to contend with competition in the market. As organisations compete for resources; customers; political power; and institutional legitimacy, this institutional conformity or isomorphism explains their “politics and ceremony” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p 150). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that institutional isomorphism is created by: coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures. Coercive isomorphism results from political pressures, pressures from other organisations and the need for legitimacy; mimetic pressures arise from market uncertainty and organisations modeling themselves on successful others in their field; and normative pressures arise from professionalisation of the industry that drives conformity and professional standards (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). “Filtering” in recruitment and promotional practices exhibited in hiring and promoting staff on a common or selective set of attributes, restricting career progression and closely guarding career tracks are considered examples of normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p 152). This study investigates this perspective by interviewing female project managers on their career experiences in project organisations in construction and property industries.

Packendorff (1995) suggests that limited application of institutional theory has been used in empirical studies of project organisations. Therefore, enquiry into the practices and “goal-rational behaviour” of project environments, that influence what happens in project organisations, is an interesting research field for exploration (Packendorff, 1995, p 329). Our study seeks to address this gap by investigating structural career barriers in project organisations and how they affect women’s career progression in Australia. It applies the insights of the institutional theory to explain how the process of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) continues to reproduce female underrepresentation in project organisations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is an exploratory study with a research framework that comes from the interpretive research approach that aims to develop a deep understanding of the work life of women project

managers in project organisations. Miles and Huberman (1994) and Burrell and Morgan (1979) support such approach by positing that an interpretive style allows insight into how people construct meaning in the natural settings of work. Further, an interpretive approach offers the best way to fully explore what Bredin and Söderlund (2013) and Laud and Johnson (2012) suggest is an under-researched area.

The research problem in this study called for an interviewing research method that enabled the exploration of career perspectives and career experiences of female project managers in project-based organisations. Trauth argues that the nature of the research problem should be the most significant selection criteria for the research methodology, stating, “what one wants to learn determines how one should go about learning it” (2001, p.4). A mix of open-ended and closed-ended (mainly for demographic questions) interview questions was used to uncover common themes in the information provided.

Women working in project management roles in the construction and property development industries were recruited through relevant professional organisations, including the Property Council of Australia (PCA), Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA) and National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), using purposive and snowballing sampling methods. The purposive sampling technique allowed for the uncovering of rich information about core issues from a smaller sample. The purposeful sampling delivered respondents that were ‘information rich’. This rich information supported the objective of identifying and understanding how women in Australian project-based organisations in construction and property development companies experience their career progression. The respondents were required to: (a) possess at least five years of industry experience, and (b) hold a middle to senior-level project management position.

Table 1 outlines the different roles held by the respondents and the number of years of industry experience.

**Insert Table 1 about here**

A total of 16 interviews were conducted. The objective of the sample strategy was not generalisability, but rather to allow for depth and breadth of information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was achieved through a diverse sample that represented female project managers from construction and property development industries, in private and publicly listed organisations from across Australia. This depth and breadth enabled the research questions to be adequately addressed and analytic saturation to be reached. The interviews were administered using a semi-structured Interview Guide, allowing for flexibility for the respondents to elaborate on their answers. The interviews were recorded and the transcripts of the interviews were analysed and coded with the support of qualitative analysis software, NVivo, to identify themes that illuminated the barriers experienced in the career paths of female project managers. The study data was triangulated using multiple methods, including examining all response data and identifying literature sources to validate the responses, and leveraging the input of subject matter experts as objective auditors of the research themes and findings, improving the accuracy of the study as suggested by Creswell (2002).

## **FINDINGS**

Several structural factors were identified as creating barriers to career progression in project-based organisations. They include (1) the current work practices of the project profession; (2) the limited career paths for project managers; and, (3) a lack of organisational commitment to gender diversity.

### **Work practices of the project profession**

As project management is known for its long working hours (Legault & Chasserio, 2012; Nandhakumar & Jones, 2001; Powell et al., 2006), and devotion to the profession (Legault & Chasserio, 2003, 2012; Lingren & Packendorff, 2006; Watts, 2009), the respondents were asked about their perceptions on work–life balance in their project-based organisations. Six of the 16 respondents (37 %) identified the pressure of working long hours, working weekends and the requirement to be always available:

*The industry is used to you answering your phone at 6 a.m. in the morning when [the] manager gets onsite and they're used to the manager calling you at 7 o'clock at night when they're still in the office so you just sort of have to be available. (Participant 9C)*

*We found when we've mastered the art of actual global working we can have our projects being worked on in a 24-hour continuous period that you know starts in New Zealand because they hit Monday first and finishes in Denver because they hit Friday last. (Participant 7C)*

*The expectation is...that your work life is more important than your private life. (Participant 16C)*

The respondents questioned the need for such long hours and suggested a culture of presenteeism existed within project-based industry:

*But there was always the underlying current even on those projects around presenteeism and doing the hours and being seen. (Participant 16C)*

*There are quite a lot of young guys starting out in project management and they work really long hours and they're churning but they're actually not making much progress because they're not working smart. (Participant 4P)*

On the topic of flexible hours the respondents identified these as non-existent:

*They are very anti flexible work and individualised work schemes. (Participant 16C)*

*The whole idea of working from home and virtual working has been talked about for too long and not really actioned. (Participant 7C)*

*Generally it's very much being present is very highly valued whether you're doing the work or not, it's all about being seen. (Participant 16C)*

The demands of efficiency and presenteeism were also displayed through the lack of support for women returning to project work from maternity leave. The general belief in those organisations seemed to be that project management couldn't be done part-time. It requires full-time commitment and availability, and therefore women wanting to come back from maternity leave on part-time basis had significant problems getting back into their old project roles:



*Now I only really want to work part-time because I have kids and you just can't work part-time in the construction industry...I mean you could never get a part-time job with a top-tier builder. (Participant 9C)*

*We've got a number of ladies who were on maternity leave and I'm noticing the same thing, they're wanting to come back to keep their feet in the game and keep across what's happening and for the financial support that it brings but it is...this industry is so challenging to do work part-time. (Participant 11C)*

Respondents commented on being forced to take a demotion into a more office-based, administrative role, and forego their project career advancement:

*So when that girl came back she was moved across to a corporate function ... so she got side stepped. (Participant 6P)*

*They get forced into taking side tracks, either becoming like a client type project manager where there are less hours or moving into estimating or sort of trying to do something else because what you're trained in just doesn't work anymore. (Participant 9C)*

*Another example like just this week someone going on maternity leave and them asking her to sign a new contract for when she gets back, she's a lower position than what she was on before. (Participant 8C)*

### **Lack of career paths for project managers**

In project-based organisations, the traditional notion of career is still prevalent with its progression along the leadership hierarchy, with advanced acquisition of higher career levels; higher social status; autonomy and leadership responsibilities (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Hölzle, 2010). However, 81% (13 of 16) of study respondents indicated that there is a lack of defined career paths in project management, creating substantive progression challenges for women. The respondents indicated that the career paths within their organisations seemed ambiguous, leaving them feeling lost, confused and frustrated:

*I must admit I've struggled a little bit here because you've got to form your destiny but at the same time it was like well what's the destiny I'm supposed to be achieving here. (Participant 14P)*

*I've never had anyone go like this is a pathway for you. I feel really lost actually and that's probably why I've disengaged because I can't see a pathway. (Participant 8C)*

*I haven't actually had any career advice... I've had to go seek my own mentors around my progression. I haven't had anyone help me or say what to do next or anything like that, it's always been very much driven by myself ... I try to figure it out myself. (Participant 8C)*

### **Lack of organisational commitment to gender diversity**

When asked about the organisations' commitment to gender policies and diversity initiatives, two thirds of women identified perceptions of a lack of commitment by their organisations. Several mentioned that their organisation's diversity policies were only tokens for legislative purposes and did not reflect the reality of the organisation's practice:

*Not worth the paper they're written on. They're not what women experience. (Participant 6P)*

*I'm not really clear... I mean I've looked at our diversity policy but it's just so vague. (Participant 8C)*

*It's been forced upon us because we are an ASX company we need to report gender equity. (Participant 13C)*

Regarding the success of attempted gender equity initiatives, five respondents confirmed that while there appeared to be some attempts to initiate gender diversity programs, and organisational rhetoric to that effect, there seemed to be no real outcomes:

*I think people were aware there was the gender diversity committee and that was about it. (Participant 12C)*

*Technically they said that we're promoting women, I haven't seen it in practice. (Participant 15C)*

*If you were to make an issue of it I don't know how that would go down. I think it would almost be seen as being a bit of troublemaker or an agitator. (Participant 9C)*

*When I said there's a lot we should be doing ... I don't have a role model to look up to in the organisation...globally... that was taken quite badly and the committee didn't go ahead. (Participant 1P)*

## **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand the career barriers that female

project managers experience in Australian project-based organisations in construction and property development industries. Despite widespread awareness of female underrepresentation in leadership, the introduction of new policies, a growing number of diversity champions, noticeable change is yet to be seen in the majority of Australian organisations (French & Strachan, 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2007; WGEA, 2014) and questions on how to better address this problem remain. By exploring how the characteristics in practices of project-based organisations affect career progression, this study provides a timely and relevant contribution to the understanding of women's underrepresentation in those organisational structures. Addressing the call by Packendorff (1995) to utilise institutional theory in study of projects, the results provide fresh insights into the relationship between the institutional isomorphic factors, their effects on the project-based work environment, and their influence on career progression of female project managers.

Upon the analysis of the perceptions and experiences of 16 female project managers in this study, the results suggest that institutional isomorphism driven by the coercive and normative forces shapes the unique structural characteristics of project-based organisations and contributes to the ongoing female underrepresentation in Australia. The professionalisation of project work leads to work practices that challenge the personal, family and work lives of project managers. The majority of respondents confirmed the pressure they experienced from practices based on industry norms and behavioural expectations such as long working hours; presenteeism; lack of work-life balance; and an extreme focus on efficiency and devotion to the profession as identified by Legault and Chasserio (2012) and Powell et al. (2006). Single women were willing to comply with those prevailing work practices in order to progress their careers. However, most women who were married and had children certainly experienced challenges in their efforts to reconcile the commitment to their work and to their families. The most prevalent challenge seemed to be the lack of support for women returning from maternity leave due to the demands for efficiency and presenteeism. Requiring full-time commitment and not allowing for part-time work practices, these demands present significant challenges for women trying to return to their previous project roles on a part-time basis. They were usually forced to take a demotion into a support role and forego their project career advancement.

This ultimately makes the choice to start a family a career-limiting option for most women. Indeed, many women seemed to either delay marriage and having children, or heavily relied on family support networks to enable them to remain in project-based organisations and roles.

The findings of our study also support the existence of normative isomorphism leading to barriers in career advancement in project-based organisations. Half the respondents (49%) indicated that there was lack of transparency and support in promotions. Often career progression seemed to rely on managers' recommendations, opportunities at hand, and respondents' own efforts rather than particular career paths, programs or structures. Seven out of 16 respondents (43%) stressed that the career paths within their organisations seem ambiguous and confusing and confirmed that they were expected by their organisations to manage their own careers with their own resources. There were very few organised career programs or little support available to female project managers. As a result, the transparency, credibility, and fairness of appointment and advancement decisions can be questioned. For many, the promotion practices appear to be subject to informal, politicised power plays, favouritism, and mateship, all suggesting prevalence of what Kanter (1997) referred to as the 'homosocial reproduction of management', designed to minimise uncertainty by closing top management positions to people who are regarded as 'different'.

The findings support the existence of coercive isomorphism through the universal presence across the industry of workplace equality and diversity policies and practices for use only as ceremonial. The respondents believed that organisations introduce such policies generally for legal reporting purposes, resulting in a lack of organisational commitment to gender diversity offering a key barrier affecting their careers. This suggests that project-based organisations are focused primarily on rituals of conformity with legislation and building legitimacy and not on genuinely combating underrepresentation.

### **Contributions to the body of knowledge**

The results of this study add to the body of knowledge about the barriers that women experience in their career progression in project-based organisations. Prior research has offered

limited information about project management career development, and how women experience their career progression challenges in project-based organisations (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Crawford et al., 2013). This study addresses this gap by providing further understanding of these issues. Unlike traditional organisations, in project-based organisations the unique organisational structure, project work practices, lack of clear career paths and support in career development, and lack of commitment to gender diversity create significant barriers, universal in the industry to career progression for women.

Further, this study contributes to the expansion of the application of the institutional theory and the institutional isomorphism by exploring these in the new and unique context of Australian project-based organisations. The findings will further extend those theories by adding the lived experiences of the study respondents, providing an additional perspective for an improved understanding of the isomorphic factors associated with barriers to career progression. Using project-based organisations illuminates the components of these theories in project-based organisational practices.

### **Contributions to practice**

Beyond the theoretical importance of these findings, the results also have practical implications for project-based organisations, their leadership, Human Resource (HR) Departments, and industry-based professional associations. Australian project-based organisations in traditional industries are experiencing increasing skill shortages. As such, they are focusing their efforts to improve international competitiveness, and are searching for effective gender diversity policies and programs. By researching structural factors within a project-based industry context, the problem is amplified to uncover isomorphic factors driving the structural career barriers. The findings offer assistance to organisations in gaining insight into the specific areas of support women need in order to achieve career growth, and offer insight into how project-based organisations can design more suitable organisational programs and policies with the purpose of growing their female project management skills pool and women's careers.

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Table 1

Respondents’ roles and industry detail

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Length of time in the industry</b>
Participant 1P	Property	Division Director	15–20 years
Participant 2C	Construction	Project Manager	15–20 years
Participant 3P	Property	Senior Project Manager	Over 20 years
Participant 4P	Property	Project Director	Over 20 years
Participant 5C	Construction	Senior Project Manager	15–20 years
Participant 6P	Property	Senior Project Manager	Over 20 years
Participant 7C	Construction	Divisional Director	10–15 years
Participant 8C	Construction	Project Manager	5–10 years
Participant 9C	Construction	Project Manager	10–15 years
Participant 10P	Property	General Manager	5–10 years
Participant 11C	Construction	National Director	Over 20 years
Participant 12C	Construction	Project Manager	10–15 years
Participant 13C	Construction	Project Manager	10–15 years
Participant 14P	Property	Project Manager	10–15 years
Participant 15C	Construction	Project Manager	15–20 years
Participant 16C	Construction	Project Manager	15–20 years