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Women working in construction management roles: is it worth it?

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Abstract

Although women's experience of working in management has been the subject of extensive comment, the particular challenges they face in this role within male-dominated professions continue to be under-reported. Drawing on ethnographic research into the career experiences of women civil engineers in the UK, this article critically discusses how women perceive management careers in construction in light of what some regard as limited financial rewards for the high levels of stress and the long hours expected in this highly competitive industry. A feminist theoretical framework has been used to thematically analyse data from thirty-one in depth interviews with women working in both the consulting and contracting parts of the business. The study highlights cultural issues of visibility and the presenteeism ethos of the sector. It also draws attention to the material constraints of construction sites where women in authority roles are 'embattled' and not taken seriously because the hostile work environment enables men to put women in a subordinate place in the construction hierarchy. Women are taking up senior management posts in construction but only in very few numbers. Their success depends on assuming 'male' behavioural norms and intensified work patterns because 'belonging' in construction workplace cultures is highly gendered.

Key words: construction; diversity; management; women; work-life balance

Introduction

Recent critiques of work offer a very mixed picture of the contemporary labour market both in the UK and global context, with issues such as the growing long hours culture (Chatzitheochari and Arber, 2009), work-life balance (Rigby and O'Brien-Smith, 2010) and the dominance of market individualism (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005) discussed as areas of particular concern. Despite these negative associations, work continues to be a significant source of personal satisfaction for many, contributing positively to a sense of self worth with Doherty (2009: 84) arguing that 'work remains an important source of identity, meaning and social affiliation'. For women, who have entered the labour market in huge numbers in recent decades, work has come to be seen as an expected and personally important role alongside family caring responsibilities such that Bolton and Houlihan (2009) argue that women are more likely than men to feel satisfied with their work and have job security. They also, however, point out that women are less likely than men to 'enjoy promotion opportunities, earn adequate pay, be a member of a company pension or be a member of a trade union' (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009: 8). They are also less likely than men to be in corporate leadership roles with Collinson and Collinson (2004) arguing that there has been a 'remasculinization' of management in which women managers at all levels will only survive if they follow the example of their male counterparts to subordinate home and family to company and career.

Whilst these concerns have exercised commentators across a broad range of industries and occupations for some time, there has in more recent years been increased research attention on the fate of the aspiring female manager in male-dominated occupations. Exploring the alleged feminsation of law and management, Bolton and Muzio (2008) highlight how the gendered processes of professional projects marginalise women and lead to the downgrading of their contribution to

corporate success. Lee and Faulkner (2010), writing about engineering culture, highlight the subtle organisational dynamics that undermine the progress of women into senior posts. Extending this critique to construction, Evetts (1993, 1996), Greed (2000), Watts (2009) and Powell et al (2006) are all pessimistic about the opportunities for women to tread the 'high road of management' (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009: 3) within the construction industry where ninety-nine per cent of those employed are male (Michielsens et al, 2001). They draw attention to a number of barriers to women's progress highlighting sexual harassment, inflexible approaches to working arrangements and a routine reliance on long working hours to complete projects on time and on budget. The issue of managing on construction sites is particularly difficult with crude humour (Watts, 2007a) and a potentially disaffected and unruly male workforce (Druker and White, 1996) making this an uncomfortable and hostile setting for women. This is due to the particularly complex economic and social relations of the sector that is characterised by a culture of mobility and self-employment which has become embedded in the industry over a long period.

This article builds on earlier writing about the sector (see Watts, 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2008; 2009) and directs attention to the experience of female managers in the industry, focusing on the specific question of whether taking up these roles against a culture of resistance is worth it. Qualitative research data is explored to reveal, through the voices of women participants that attitudes to gender politics within construction are resistant to change resulting in management work for women as conflicted and draining, with many also regarding the financial rewards as insufficient.

The article proceeds in six parts beginning with a brief discussion of visibility and the ideas of Cohn (2000) and Kanter (1993) that point to features of 'otherness' in the corporate workplace context. This is followed by detail of the UK construction industry to give material context to the discussion of the research on which this article draws. Information about research methods and participants follows as an introduction to the presentation of findings that have the key themes of choosing a management pathway and the challenges for women of working in authority roles on construction sites. In conclusion, the article points to the need for culture change within the industry that hitherto has remained resistant to adopting modern working practices.

Gendered visibility

Kanter's (1993) seminal work on the sociology of gender explores the mechanics of corporate behaviour as well as the particular problems minorities face in achieving workplace advancement. The term 'minority' refers to any cohort that represents less than fifty per cent of the total and, to which the feature of standing out as different attaches. Kanter argues that minority status always involves the attribute of visibility that can have both positive and negative effects. Central to this ambivalence is the issue of risk; high visibility is positive when things are going well and targets are achieved but, in the face of poor performance or costly errors, visibility becomes problematic under the watchful gaze of critical colleagues and superiors. When newcomers who are different (for example, in terms of culture, gender or ethnicity) join an established homogeneous group they can represent a potential challenge to the majority. One response to reinforce the dominant culture of the majority is what Kanter terms boundary heightening that can be understood as actions by the majority to emphasise their group characteristics to make the newcomer feel as different and 'outside' as possible. Thus, for example, when a woman enters a male-dominated workplace sexual jokes and crude language may become overt rather than repressed. In some settings, the physicality of the workplace can border on sexual

harassment – this holds particular resonance for women working on construction sites where women and other highly visible minorities are the butt of lewd jokes and comic innuendo (Watts, 2007a). Similarly, in the setting of the boardroom where a woman finds herself in the minority of one within an otherwise all male team, talk before the main business begins may be centred on male sport interests leaving her outside this social discourse (Cohn, 2000).

Cohn (2000) develops Kanter's (1993) critique to argue that boundary heightening behaviour on the part of the majority is intended to test the newcomer, to gauge their resilience, their willingness to conform and fit in. Such behaviour has as its primary effect the isolation of the entrant. If the newcomer is defiant or non-compliant this isolation is increased with their being further deprived of social support from colleagues. In these circumstances the likelihood that the newcomer will fail is increased. Within the business context being without friends is professionally dangerous (Cohn, 2000: 100) and can soon escalate into a profound handicap that cumulatively may result in a damaged reputation, a position from which it is difficult to recover. The consequences for women in a workplace where men define themselves as the norm are varied and contextual, but these can be usefully summarised as the necessity to overcome their 'otherness' (Davies, 2003).

An extreme form of 'otherness' is where women have the 'only woman' status becoming tokens, accruing on the one hand, the advantage of being different and visible but, on the other hand, having to face the loneliness of outsider estrangement from male peers. The potential for outsider estrangement, however, is not solely determined by gender demarcations and the work of Kerfoot and Knights (2004) and Connell (1995; 2002) has contributed to understandings of the ways in which 'male' and 'masculinity' are socially constructed resulting in heterogeneous masculinities.

Context

Civil engineering is one of several built environment professions serving the UK construction industry, operating as part of a huge sector that employs well over a million people (Social Trends, 2010). Although the multi-disciplinary and social nature of the industry has received limited attention in the literature, its products and cultural stereotypes have been well documented (Watts, 2007a; 2007b; Greed, 2000; Paap, 2006), highlighting its strongly competitive and unequivocally male-dominated features. Women are poorly represented, particularly at senior levels (NCE, 22 May 2008) and currently comprise only five per cent of the total (ICE, 2010). The 'place' of women in construction remains a contested issue (see NCE, 2 December 2010) and an industry salary survey reveals that women earn 32% less than their male colleagues (NCE, 15 May 2008). The UK profession has experienced great structural change over the past twenty years in response to the shrinking size of its localised traditional market and the commercial realities of globalisation that include high labour mobility (Fellini et al, 2007). The need to adapt to a new business climate has coincided with a shortage of entrants to the profession and has resulted in an associated drive to encourage greater numbers of men and women to join this and other construction professions. Some of these measures have been directed particularly at women (Powell et al, 2006) but have failed to attract them in significant numbers.

The development of an international market for construction services has led to the rise of the non-technical corporate manager whose expertise has been 'grown' on MBA programmes and other management training courses making them a highly marketable cross-industry functionary. A new breed of highly skilled manager is not 'company-bound', often moving from one organisation to another, adopting the role of

trouble-shooter. The proliferation of business advisers and marketing gurus are now an established feature of construction specifically to promote greater efficiency and sharper project management. How in the longer term, the advent of the 'super manager', who comes without engineering training, will be received by the wider industry is uncertain but Evetts (1996) notes that, increasingly, engineers and scientists find themselves in competition with management specialists (often accountants) for some of the most senior posts.

Method and participant profile

The qualitative research discussed in this article adopted an ethnographic approach to data collection, with semi-structured interviews as the principal method. My work in the sector as an independent training and technology consultant over a seventeen-year period involved visiting projects and construction sites as well as bringing me into contact with senior industry figures. The aim of the research was to explore women's professional experience of working in construction. A range of subjects was covered and management and leadership were discussed under the umbrella topic of career advancement. Discussion of the study's methodology has been outlined in earlier work (see Watts, 2006) but is briefly revisited below, highlighting the participant profile and conduct of the research.

The thirty-one participants ranged in age from twenty three to fifty six years and were employed in both the design and building sides of the business. As shown in other research (Peel and Boxall, 2005, for example), becoming self-employed can increase work autonomy and three participants had left senior employed posts to set up their own consultancies for this reason. The group included three women in main board director posts and a further two in associate director positions. A majority of the rest were in junior/middle management roles and only five participants indicated that they were not attracted to the management side of the business. Of the thirty-one respondents, sixteen were married, five were living with a partner, eight were single, one was separated and one divorced; thirteen participants had school age children.

A series of semi-structured interviews with participants in their workplaces formed the main data-gathering tool. Interviews were audio taped, manually transcribed and then coded yielding the categories for analysis. My knowledge of the operational structures within the profession underpinned my research credibility (see Watts, 2006) suggesting to interviewees that I had a legitimate reason to be interested in them and what they do. The study's findings are now discussed below developing the themes of uncertainty about the sufficiency of management rewards and the challenging experience of being a female manager on construction sites.

Taking a management pathway – an ambivalent choice for some

With management as a key signifier of success, a majority of participants had chosen a career management pathway. This choice, in many cases, was an ambivalent one despite the significantly higher financial rewards of management work (Langford et al, 1995). Doubts about the benefits of becoming a manager centred on two key issues: insufficient remuneration given the high pressure and stress levels associated with construction management roles and the expectations of employers that managers would be constantly available as a function of the dominant presenteeism culture of the building industry (Watts, 2007c). The following comments from three participants illustrate these concerns:

The nuts and bolts of engineering give it a competitive almost antagonistic culture and as a manager, especially a senior manager, you are always going to get it in the

neck and I don't think it can be worth it, not when you see what you get at the end of the month for all the hours you've worked and the aggravation.
(Gillian, aged 32, married with three children, project manager)

I just don't think it's worth it for the sort of money you're paid. Working seventy hours a week with all the travelling and hassle plus all the aggravation on site. I've seen so many colleagues driven into the ground and I don't want that to be me. (Naomi, aged 26, single, early career graduate engineer)

All the senior managers at our place are there til late in the evening; I think haven't they got homes to go to? They don't have a life, not a proper life and I couldn't do that.

(Helen, aged 36, single and mid-career with the intention of leaving the profession)

Working part-time in a management function was regarded as problematic and virtually impossible to sustain. Where such arrangements are connected to other non-work roles such as parenting they invoke negative visibility and are viewed with suspicion (Cohn, 2000). Cockburn (1991) found that working motherhood is punished in the workplace with women unable to gain acceptance as serious professionals because juggling the demands of paid and unpaid work compromises what Davies (1996: 669) terms the 'masculinist vision' of professions. Two participants in middle-management positions described their experience of trying to combine a management role on a part-time basis with caring responsibilities following the birth of their children. One of these women, after a year, was persuaded by her employer that engineering management and motherhood do not mix and left the company. The other woman found herself gradually removed from the decision-making arena and was told by a company director "*her career was going nowhere*". As might be expected these women spoke with disillusion about the construction industry that one described as "*just swallowing you up*", driven by organisational expectations that hard-working means long-working and that the 'personal' takes place outside the process of labour exchange. For a majority of participants in management roles the demands of the job appeared overwhelming forcing some to choose between being an engineering manager and having a family. Other research has shown that women managers are far more likely to be single and/or childless than their male colleagues (Wajcman, 1998).

Whilst there was almost universal agreement about the pressure on construction managers to, as one participant put it, '*deliver the business*' in a highly competitive industry, the cut and thrust of directing projects and managing people was enjoyed by some participants who had decided to prioritise their careers almost as a life project. In one case the pleasure of taking charge was expressed thus:

I really enjoy having the overview of the project and getting the best out of the team. It's very stressful at times but lots of management is like that; at least for us there is something to show for it.

(Miriam, aged 37, partnered with no children, associate company director)

Another participant, having achieved the post of joint managing director of a major consulting firm before leaving to set up her own independent practice, commented on the ways in which she was never allowed to '*fully join the male club*'. She spoke with great enthusiasm about the her management work that she found fulfilling but was of the view that the consistently long hours she was forced to work may have contributed to the breakdown of her marriage, leading her to note that '*marriage and motherhood in this business are often difficult to sustain*'.

Family issues and insufficient remuneration were not the only factors influencing participants' choices. One interviewee described the culture of senior management as '*bleeding people dry*' and her discomfort with the person she might become if she advanced her management career further. A further factor affecting the choice of career path was the extent to which a move into management involved separation from science and engineering practice. This was of concern to some of the newer recruits who had chosen engineering to practise and develop their technical and scientific skills rather than manage others to do this. Kanter (1993:301) found in her research into corporate organisational life in the USA that some companies have established formal career paths for professionals to enable them to concentrate on their specialism without moving into management. Kanter notes, however, that for engineers and scientists these dual ladders carry a suspicion that they are second-rate and are often seen as a compromise.

The issue of construction sites

The particular power relations that operate in the setting of the construction site continue to provide the arena for macho gender display that has significant impacts on women. Working on site appeared to require regimented visibility criteria with all grades of worker knowing their place and having discrete but clear levels of incorporation. Roles on site for civil engineers revolve mainly around the position of resident engineer who has the responsibility for directing the actual building process (laying out of site plans, checking measurements and overseeing the delivery and installation of materials) that always retains an element of experimentation (Schinzinger and Martin, 2000). The words of one respondent sum up the difficulty "*I think this thing about managing manual labour, that is the big one*". (Pauline, aged 45, single with no children, senior manager)

Most participants had valued their experience of being a manager on site, particularly contributing to the live building process. For most, however, this came at a price with the often-harsh physical conditions preferable to the abrasive social environment (Watts, 2007a). The main problems appeared to stem from the site subculture that was imbued with the use of crude language, displays of pornographic imagery in site offices and the resistance to any kind of managerial control (Watts, 2007b). The acute nature of some of these problems for women is explored more fully below through the voices of the participants themselves.

Women talked about the intimidation they felt particularly connected to rectifying problems on site. The following two extracts illustrate this:

I used to worry very much about talking to steel fixers who were twice the size of me and telling them that this steel isn't fixed right and they were quite intimidating. They would use their height and their size and say what are you talking about and I would say actually I don't think that this is right. (Geena, aged 36, married with two children, group manager)

I had awful trouble with one site foreman. He wanted me to sign off the setting out but I couldn't. It didn't meet the spec and I told him it would all have to be done again. He got so angry and said he wouldn't let me forget it. And he didn't. He was awkward about everything and made my life hell. (Mary, aged 28, married with no children, resident engineer)

Disputes of the kind described above, where site staff openly challenge decisions of managers, can seriously undermine the latter's credibility. Where managers are women there is a heightened visibility creating an overwhelming pressure to perform

successfully (Cohn, 2000). In some cases this meant adopting some of the behaviour of the dominant 'laddish' culture as noted below:

There were good times and bad on site but my general approach was to give as good as I got so I ended up swearing with the best of them. In one way I think it raised my standing with the lads. (Pauline, aged 45, single, senior manager)

Being one of the lads, however, was not a survival strategy adopted by all as the comment below demonstrates:

If you rose above it and kept saying I am not going to lower myself to their level, you know be distant, you were OK but if you thought about it or were a sensitive person you couldn't cope with it. It would just destroy you. (Susan Leyton, aged 47, married with two children, chartered principal engineer)

Not all participants spoke negatively of their managerial site experience but they were a minority. For most, their daily endeavours seemed to involve varying degrees of confrontation, close surveillance due to heightened visibility, sexual harassment, intimidation and wider safety issues, all experienced as emotionally draining and, for one participant, was the reason for deciding to leave the profession.

Conclusion

The issue of visibility was an underpinning theme of much of the data. Women within construction, particularly those in supervisory/management roles, are highly visible. On building sites this takes the form of embodied spectacle and appears difficult to negotiate. Embodied visibility contrasts with women's continuing cultural invisibility adding to their frustration with an industry that is notionally modernising but in reality is very resistant to change. The discourses of construction are shaped by a masculine hegemonic view that reinforces and supports the invisibility of women with all grades of management heavily controlled by men (Fielden et al, 2000). Because of the business pressures of ensuring projects do not overrun, women can be motivated to fit in rather than challenge the status quo, though this often has a high personal cost in terms of emotional strain. The accounts above suggest that women who succeed in senior management posts are more motivated to fit into the existing hierarchy than to dismantle it.

Those who want to work in management positions taking advantage of part-time or flexible working are viewed with suspicion and are made highly visible by what is seen as their less than full commitment to the job. Despite the debate in the sector about the legitimacy and potential benefits of more flexible work practices (NCE, 22 May 2008), the assumption that senior management can only be a full-time undertaking usually involving very long hours, prevails. There was agreement that, as managers, attempts to create a positive work/life balance would cast them as 'slackers', making them readily visible targets for criticism from colleagues. Resisting the heroic narrative of staying late is incompatible with management in construction because a culture of 'competitive presenteeism' (Simpson, 1998) has developed leaving the existing power relations largely unchallenged. The discursive power of male primacy is reinforced by management practices and women have to adjust their work styles to accommodate the challenges they face arising from the visibility continuum (Cohn, 2000).

Existing literature offers insight into the experiences of women in management roles across a broad range of male-dominated occupations and professions. There is, however, a gap in respect of the built environment sector, and this article, having

identified a number of cultural barriers to women establishing and sustaining management careers in construction, goes some way towards filling that gap. Like all ethnographic research, the data, observations and interpretations presented are bounded by the context from which they are drawn and thus are specifically located.

Participants' names have been changed

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