

## **FIGHTING POVERTY IN SOUTH AFRICA THROUGH EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION**

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### **Abstract**

**Poverty for South African women is compounded by the political history with women having lack of access to education, facilities and housing which impacts on access to work. This problem remains despite the intentions of the democratic government to empower women. In developed countries, discrimination is prevalent in entry, training (principally apprenticeships) and promotion. Similar issues challenge SA women being employed.**

**Given that the construction industry is a strong employer of labour, the industry could have a commensurate inclusion of women to relieve poverty. This study, conducted in South Africa 2004 – 2006, ascertains attitudes and perceived barriers held by male and female employees and managers in the South African industry. Responses were drawn from a sample size of 40 female current and potential employees. Qualitative and quantitative approaches determined how women may enter and be sustained in construction. Qualitative research used exploratory open-ended interviews; subsequent semi-structured interviews stemming from questionnaires; and one focus group discussion. Quantifiable information from the interviews was added to the data base of questionnaire responses. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for triangulation. Comparisons between first and third world situations show that South African women have fewer negative issues and are positive about being accommodated in the industry. Vocational and modular training rather than apprenticeships, safety on site, minimum numbers on site and protection from HIV/AIDS are critical factors. Given appropriate conditions, all respondents were favourable towards women working as artisans.**

**Keywords:** Poverty Alleviation; Women; Skills; Training.

### **Introduction**

Construction is the core of the economy (Agapiou, 2005) but for women in developed countries to access work in construction, the workplace has to be organised against discrimination in terms of entry, training and promotion. In SA, similar issues exist against women being employed – entry and training, but with health and safety (negatively compounded by the AIDS) being particularly problematic. As a result women in construction are in services rather than in production – as many as two thirds in Africa (Bullock, 1994; Verwey, 2006). Given the construction industry is reflected as such a strong employer of labour, it could be hoped that the industry could have a commensurate inclusion of women. The over-arching driver of change is the White Paper of 1998 which set out the perceived impediments to construction industry growth and demand and the government's plans to overcome them. The Labour Relations Act of 1995 replacing that of 1956, for example, introduced negotiations between labour, employers and government thus shifting

from the previous adversarial standpoint. It established a unified industrial relations system for all employees and promoted collective bargaining and workplace forums (Department of Public Works, 1999). The socio-economic position of women in South Africa has been weak for decades. In terms of heritage, Africa has a 'triple heritage' of negative factors for women, namely, cultural norms, economic marginalisation and colonialism (Njoh and Rigos, 2003). Poverty for women in South Africa is compounded by political history and the fact that 54 per cent of the population, that is women, is, in most instances, still more disadvantaged than men (South African Institute of Race Relations South African Survey 2002/2003). The impact on women is in lack of access to education, facilities and housing which further impact on access to work. This is despite the intentions of the democratic government (to empower women) which have been stated in policy documents outlining development and the statutory actions taken to establish equality. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act promulgated in 1997 provided more protection in that it covered part-time and contract workers who had a minimum employment of eight hours a week with any one employer (Valodia, 2001). Mr. Rams Ramashia, Director-General of Labour, quoted President Mbeki as being concerned at the growing casualisation of the labour market, and said that the government was looking at ways to plug loopholes enabling employers to employ casual labour instead of permanent employees by making "new amendments to the Labour Relations Act and Basic Conditions of Employment Act to prevent this" (Kane-Berman, 2004). However, a reason for the evasion of these legal requirements (and others such the Employment Equity Act which stipulates the minimum employment of women) is that the law only applies to firms employing a minimum of 50 people.

## **Research methods**

A study was conducted in South Africa between 2004 and 2006 on the attitudes and perceived barriers to women gaining entry and training in construction. The data was drawn to reflect the following key areas. The responses were drawn from a sample size of 40 female current and potential employees. The choice sampling was justified by the outcomes of the pilot study. Questionnaires were disseminated and interviews conducted in the Western Cape, Gauteng and Kwazulu-Natal. Respondents comprised 122 construction respondents comprising 40 owners / managers and 116 employees completing questionnaires with 12 owners / managers and 14 employees being interviewed during the period May 2005 to July 2006 in Western Cape, Gauteng and Kwazulu-Natal. Comments were distributed for triangulation of interpretation, tagging for memos and analysis. Comments from interview text not attached to questionnaire questions were coded under three alternatives. These codes are:

- 1 Potentially Positive: the comment is helping; could help; is needed to help; or is possible; or gives advice on positive change.
- 2 Negative: the comment describes blocking women's progress and will continue to do so.
- 3 Currently Positive: the comment is absolutely and currently true and the answer is yes.

The total number of respondents' comments on the different topics amounted to 883, of which the gender breakdown was Male: 54.7 per cent and Female: 45.3 per cent. This reflected the approximate balance in gender of the samples. These 883 comments were analysed into 1,670 expressions of opinion on different topics. The gender breakdown remained: Male: 54.7 per cent and Female: 45.3 per cent. Males and females expressed almost exactly the same number of opinions on the different topics: Males (1.892) and Females (1.890).

### Research question:

- Given that the construction industry in South Africa is such a strong employer of labour, is the potential female workforce being provided with equal opportunities?
- Has the promulgation of the Labour Relations Act and Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997) significantly addressed the triple heritage' of negative factors for women, namely, cultural norms, economic marginalisation and colonialism ?

### Research Results

Women will not enter an industry about of which they have no awareness and in which they cannot visualise themselves. Thus lack of perception of the construction industry as a workplace for women is a core problem. Contributing to this is the lack of communication between the industry, schools and communities which was commented on extensively and equally by both genders:

*“If you break a stick from a tree, you can only bend it while it is still fresh. This means that girls who are still at school are still ‘shapable’ and can be directed. I myself am living proof of how someone can be directed. I am what they call a previously disadvantaged person, but thanks to education I have changed myself. Township outreach courses helped shape who I am today.”*

A male owner commented, *“Understanding the construction environment already at school level. Suggest survey women and ask them where they feel they can contribute best (Specific trades possibly more suited)”*.

Lack of visualising women in construction was also perceived as more of a problem for all employees involved in site work than it did for those in purely administrative positions. A female owner commented:

*Girl builders in particular are hampered by lack of knowledge of tools. Girl students don’t understand terms used in first year lectures at Technikon because they had no practical experience; had never wandered over a building site. It was only in their 2nd year that they saw, for example, different sorts of cement mixes and learnt the slang terms applied them. Then their lectures became relevant.*

Visualising women in construction as a problem for potential female employees as these findings indicated and a female employee commented, *“There is a perception in South Africa that construction is a “man’s job”. Women are wary of entering the industry because of this perception, and are encouraged to think that they don’t have the necessary strength – even though many jobs in the construction industry do not actually require a lot of physical strength.”* Research describes the industry as having a poor image for women in terms of its working conditions and their career options, but in developing countries the need for work has caused women to overcome it, for example, in India (Werna, 2001 Wells, 2001). Furthermore, in southern Africa, the literature describes current attempts of the industry to change this perception held of it and its failure to do so (Rantshadi, 2004).

Almost all employees from those in administrative positions (93.3 per cent) to those working on-site (71.4 per cent) recognised the value of education – which would indicate that their attitudes to women on site could change. Women gave emphasis to qualifications in questionnaires and in interviews. For the latter the greater number of positive responses came from women (58 per cent) – but also the greatest number of negative comments came from women because of discrimination they have experienced (76 per cent). The premise that women in developing

countries are closer to the process of home building and do not have the same negative reactions as do women in developed countries is borne out in literature (Ngowi, 1996, Kalabamu, 2004). Access to training is not yet considered a problem by the younger employees; ages 20-35 years all showed weighting in the response categories of neutral to least problem. Older employees' (in their early forties) perceptions of their greatest problem is access to training. It remains a problem with increasing age. This reflects the current drive of the Construction Industry Board's Construction Charter, which aims to increase the representation of women in construction and target skills development (CIDB, 2006).

However, every category of employee and job type was positive that mobile units were the appropriate approach to training provision with artisans, middle and junior management and professionals being in the greater majority (47 per cent positive:13 per cent negative). In terms of gender based attitudes positive over negative responses were 4:1 for males and 3:1 for females, with one employee remarking: *'The company is fully involved and instrumental in setting up training courses which are skills based as opposed to University courses'*. .

Training was managed under more formal structures in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in South Africa but excluded women. Now women may be included but training is still not adequate. The first model for training in South Africa was established in 1904 with the founding of the Building Industries Federation of South Africa (BIFSA). Competence based training systems were introduced in 1985 which granted recognition for the modules completed to trainees who did not have the ability to complete all the designated modules of their trade (Nolan, 1987). The National Qualification Framework (NQF) was established in 1995 to assess prior-learning and experience, competency-based education and training. The purpose of the NQF is to enable workers of all educational levels to enter the building industry and to advance the skills of the existing employees. This is more relevant for a workforce without formal education than is the determinant of an entry level according to numeracy and literacy. The Building Industry Training Scheme (BITS), working through the Building Industries Federation of South Africa (BIFSA) plus a similar scheme for the civil engineering industry sector, namely, the Civil Engineering Industry Training Scheme (CEITS) were replaced and unified by a sectoral training body, the Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA).

These training models, whilst achieving limited success, have not been replaced by a better model. Possibly, distance has lent enchantment to this view as many recalled the previous model as having been more successful than research has described it, as this remark from a male manager indicates:

*Problem training women artisans – no worthwhile training colleges anymore. Only place being used is college in Paarl for carpenters.*

The female employees being more potentially positive about training (females being 75 per cent of responses), possibly reflected their need for the work to support children. This is corroborated by literature on construction in developing countries, which describes women as being more responsible, particularly in terms of their financial management (Marshall, 2002, FinMark Trust, 2005). A female employee commented: *"Most women are breadwinners and working on site would help reduce poverty and unemployment"*.

Few are currently positive (about the opportunities for practical experience post training), Women were more negative (67 per cent) and less potentially positive than men (31 per cent) which correlates with the literature that women may be underpaid compared with men. Equal pay has been an issue for women in developed countries from early recordings of women working in construction in Europe (Brew and Garavan, 1995; Eisenberg, 2004; Pedersen, 2004) and continues to be despite legislation (Clarke and Wall, 2004). Unsurprisingly, women in developing countries who have traditionally had less protection have poor records of equal pay (Casale and Postel, 2003).

It would appear that leave is not particularly contentious with general agreement across groups. Clothing was considered unimportant - only 0.2 per cent of comments referred to this. Possibly this is because the importance of personal protective equipment is not fully recognised (English, Haupt and Smallwood, 2006). Leave is not particularly contentious with general agreement across groups. Clothing was considered unimportant - only 0.2 per cent of comments referred to this. Childcare was considered relevant but not contentious by males. Females made very few comments. African women have strong social networks which encompass childcare. But, as Western mores erode traditional lifestyles, such networks may be diminished and childcare become an issue as is described in the literature of developed countries (CIOB, 2006). Both genders of employees considered transport the least of the problems. This, again, may be related to having the job being so valued at employee level that secondary items were not considered barriers.

For all that employees considered transport a minor problem, the construction industry in South Africa cannot be complacent on this issue and certain findings reflect concern (English, 2002). Furthermore, literature describes lack of childcare and transport as being discriminatory factors against women working in and the provision of supporting infrastructure a factor in engendering a female workforce (English *et al.*, 2006; Sommerville, Kennedy and Orr, 1992).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

It would appear from the comments that until there is a critical mass of women on construction sites, it will not be economically viable for SMME employers to provide separate ablution facilities. One female employee observed: *"It depends on the size of the site and the type of project. Sometimes if it is a big project, it will be clear which toilets are female or male toilets. But on small projects there is usually only one toilet and the women must share with the men."*

The minimum number of women on a site in order for them to feel secure was queried in a number of ways. Employees were asked to give the correct number on site for women to feel comfortable and later in the questionnaire, the correct number of cleaners to feel comfortable. The results thus were triangulated to overcome misinterpretation of this critical question. The number of women for appropriate critical mass was five women or 34 per cent of the workforce on site. Interviews showed that, female employees were consistently more positive about women and considered that there should be high numbers on-site. Only men, no women, were negative. Given such a critical mass, women were positive (65 per cent) about the possibilities for women.

Female employees (75 per cent positive: 25 per cent negative) felt more concerned at the need for greater supervision and security on sites for their safety. Men were more equally divided (46 per cent positive: 54 per cent negative). This reflects that men feel so negatively that they do not feel intervention can help whereas women are potentially positive. The comments made in interviews confirm the view that critical mass is essential for a minority group to perform successfully – even to the extent that one owner/manager commented *"Best to start with all women sites: no problems would arise then from men and women working alongside"*.

It appears that Health and Safety is an issue for concern given recent findings in studies in South Africa (English *et al.*, 2006) and current welfare facilities for women in construction are inadequate (Smallwood, 2004). There are few currently positive statements and numerous negative statements from both genders in this study. The comments quoted below reflect the dichotomy that women would be more at risk on the one hand because of lack of support and on the other, that there would be no greater risk to them compared with men – possibly less risk as women are reputed to be more careful. A male manager remarked, *"If males can walk around, up*

*step ladders, down scaffolding, etc. I don't see why women can't do it. Nowadays, sites are kept in such a condition that even clients can move around easily without risk of danger."*

The risk of HIV/Aids is aggravated by the nomadic life style demanded of construction workers (Simon-Meyer, 2005). The current charter notes that work conditions on some sites are exceptionally dire with extended periods away from home, long hours, unsafe working environment and inadequate housing arrangements being particularly negative for women (CIDB, 2006). Women from poorer echelons are found to be ignorant of the kind of health problems facing them; they are more vulnerable to the virus than are men, but are often unable to afford necessary health services and drugs prescribed. It can be surmised that they will thus be more adversely affected by the disease (Olufemi, 1999). A female employee remarked that "*They [employees] know company has HIV/AIDS programme but cannot remember what it entitled them to. Though all employees, subcontractors, etc. (everyone on site) has to have a lecture by the H&S officer before they are allowed onsite, are given the written safety conditions on paper, including rules of behaviours expected of them on site; and the company's policy on AIDS. They have to sign they have received this information before they can move onto site.*"

Artisan work was by 100 per cent the first choice. Managerial, graduate and administrative followed – all areas where women are currently most gaining access. Current positions of labourer and cleaner received low scores. Thus, the results of this study can be said to support the intentions of the Construction Charter (CIDB, 2006) to develop women and in so doing, work towards resolving the skills shortage. Overall, the conclusions of this study indicate that there are numerous motivating factors for women to be employed, in terms of their abilities, the qualities they bring to the workplace, the needs of the industry for skilled workforce and the requirements of the constitution.

#### **Research Objectives:**

- Ascertain the image of construction and level of self-awareness of employability in construction held by women and men;
- Ascertain the barriers that need to be dissembled in order to achieve the entry of women into the construction industry workforce;
- Assess the attitudes to and priorities of managers in the industry for inclusion of women
- Assess if current construction industry attitudes, structure, laws and practices are conducive or are counter-productive to the accommodation of women in the workforce.

#### **Key Lessons Learned:**

- Practitioners in the South African construction industry need to communicate with women, from scholars to women in communities, in order to expose them to opportunities in the industry.
- Women in South Africa perceive the construction industry as offering opportunities for employment.
- Women and men are positive about the potential for women in the industry given appropriate conditions.

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