

RICS Women in Construction Adjudication Scholarship

The UK construction industry has long been a crucial driver of economic growth and development contributing to 10% of the UK GDP, making construction a significant contributor to economic stability. However, the industry is at a critical point where labour shortages, underrepresented skills and programme overruns threaten this growth with the so-called 'missing million' workers. This 'missing million' is the biggest fear for the industry and represents a labour shortage where nearly one million extra people are to be recruited into the industry by 2030 to meet construction demand. Recruitment firms such as Search Consultancy have found that 83% of businesses within the construction industry are currently feeling the strain from a lack of skilled workers.

To ensure the strength of the industry it is vital that companies increase productivity, upskill and retain staff, improve training programmes and enable greater collaboration and conflict avoidance to adapt to the demands of the industry. Urgent action is needed to future proof the construction sector so it can continue to grow successfully and meet government and industry targets.

If we are to overcome the challenges resulting from the skills shortages, it is key that the industry increases the visibility and awareness of the endless array of roles on offer, improve diversity and ensure construction companies are as inclusive as possible. Attracting and retaining staff from a range of diverse backgrounds, particularly with young people and underrepresented genders, into all areas of construction and the built environment will ensure businesses are being representative of society and preparing for the future.

One of the most underrepresented groups within the construction industry is women. Women's contribution into the wider economy plays an important role and can be an economic force for good. Women form half of the consumer base within the built environment, whether it's being part of the workforce in an office or as a retail customer; yet construction related companies remain male-dominated particularly at managerial and senior leadership levels.

Women will play an integral role in filling the skills shortages facing the construction sector in the near future and it is vital the industry implements a proactive approach to recruiting and retaining a diverse talent pool to ensure its success. Only 15.8% of the construction sector are female and the reality is often that it still falls largely on women to challenge the gender inequalities. It is imperative, now more than ever, that construction firms concerted efforts to attract more women into the sector and provide clear routes for career development and progression.

Research has shown that companies with more women in senior and leadership roles have more engaged workers and are often shown to be more profitable. When there is a higher percentage of women within the business, employees of all genders are more likely to have higher job satisfaction, exhibit more meaningful work and have less burnout. With the significant number of benefits to the role of women in the workplace, it's important to actively challenge outdated perceptions within construction and for everyone in the industry to commit to the advancement of underrepresented genders.

Tackling gender inequality in the construction industry requires a multi-faceted approach. In order to strive for equality, the industry must challenge the key barriers to the advancement of underrepresented genders by improving education in schools and universities, changing perceptions and increasing the visibility of industry leaders and ambassadors. However, commitment is needed from everyone in the industry to address these barriers to entry, especially for women. It is important for companies to focus on training and leadership programmes of all their employees, not just women, to ensure employees at all levels understand the value of diversity within the workplace. With increased inclusivity, businesses can increase productivity, foster talent and promote diversity within construction-related jobs.

A recent study conducted by McKinsey titled 'Women in the Workplace 2023' discovered that roughly 80% of women want to be promoted to the next level, compared to 70% in 2019. This study demonstrates that women are becoming more ambitious to strive for senior leadership roles, the challenge is retaining them in these roles when they get there. Following the pandemic, many construction companies have introduced flexible working as the new norm which has allowed many women the opportunity to pursue their ambitions and stay within their chosen career paths, balancing their work and personal life. By supporting hybrid working, the construction industry can provide a better work-life balance for all employees and reduce fatigue and burnout, which is key to marketing the industry to a wider array of diverse groups and closing the gap on the 'missing million'.

Although gender equality within the construction sector has been improving over the years, with women now making up a higher proportion of construction workforce since official records began, women remain massively underrepresented. There are a number of different barriers facing meaningful progress to promoting women into the industry including discrimination based on gender, lack of training and common misconceptions of a masculine culture.

One of the key challenges to promoting women into the industry is the lack of women in senior, aspirational positions. Poor representation means the younger, early careers workforce fail to see any long-term career ambitions for women within the construction industry. Resulting in a significant proportion leaving the industry much sooner than their male counterparts.

Many initiatives have been established for the advancement of women in the construction industry including Women into Construction, Mentoring Circle and the Women in Construction and Engineering Awards. However, there still remains key industry sectors which are vastly more underrepresented than others; one major area being construction dispute resolution. Recent studies from Kings College London found that within the UK, only 7.8% of practicing adjudicators are women; roughly 39 out of the 500 currently practicing. Following the results of this report, the Adjudication Society is now targeting 30% of adjudicators being women within the next 3 years.

In order to achieve this ambitious target, the dispute resolution sector is showcasing its dedication to improving gender equality through establishing the Women in Adjudication Group, under the umbrella of the Adjudication Society, and Equal Representation in Adjudication Pledge to promote women into the field. These initiatives will offer training and support for women getting into the dispute resolution field while also focusing on understanding why female participation is so low; allowing the sector to implement targeted strategies to overcome these barriers. This will provide an increase in the number of skilled candidates available to assess construction adjudications and offer quicker and more cost-effective dispute resolution solutions.

Despite the overall importance to economic stability, the construction industry typically experiences minimal growth; leading to frequent time and cost overruns that hinder potential. Construction is one of the few industries where disputes are incredibly common, resulting in wasted time, costs and resources. The sixth annual CRUX 'Insight Report for 2023' highlights the impact that construction disputes can cause, with average disputed costs of \$100 million and extension of time claims of more than two-thirds. Therefore, efficient dispute resolution is of fundamental importance within the UK construction industry as lengthy disputes can result in significant costs for both parties involved and can cause immeasurable harm to business relationships and brand reputation. Alternative dispute resolution service (ADR) is defined in law as any method for resolving a dispute that is an alternative to the courts. Implementing an ADR service, such as adjudication, has been shown to benefit the construction and built environment industry by resolving cases quicker, impartially and out of courts. Having the knowledge, training and ability to work as a dispute resolver is an invaluable skill in a world where projects are becoming increasingly more complex.

The ideal solution would be to prevent disputes from happening and improve the way everyone within the industry relates to each other. With the establishment of organisations such as the Conflict Avoidance Coalition this may be the way forward however, it seems almost impossible to stop any disputes arising from a project. Implementing ADR and conflict resolution methods such as mediation and adjudication have proven more successful time and time again when they are inclusive. By embracing and actively encouraging gender diversity within dispute resolution, the construction industry will benefit from a fuller range of expertise, knowledge and skills which will allow adjudications to be the main form of dispute resolution within the UK and promote the use of ADR.

To ensure the future and strength of the construction industry, companies must strive to not just protect but also strengthen gender equality across the wider array of sectors and particularly within dispute resolution. Improving diversity within construction dispute resolution and increasing the number of skilled adjudicators can provide enormous benefits to the industry. Reduced expenditure and quicker results on dispute claims will mitigate the overall impact a dispute has; ensuring more projects meet their programme, cost and resource targets. This will support in the industry in becoming more inclusive, growing successfully and meeting the needs of the future.