

Stepping into my first leadership position in January 2022, I started out with a team of five Quantity Surveyors, which I grew sixfold, over the course of two years to 30 professionals. This organic growth was driven by a fixation on the positive, nurturing culture I expected within my team, and a focus on investing in the future of our profession, without compromise on quality of delivery.

My achievements over this period are so wildly beyond what I thought I could have accomplished. I remember, just before chartership my then boss asking me what I wanted to be once I achieved Chartership. My response at the time was simply, 'I think senior QS would be nice'. Now I am an RICS assessor, a Fellow of the institute, and sit on the Matrics UK Board. I have reflected on my career journey so far, the support I have received and the barriers I have overcome. I have considered how this compares to the wider 'female experience', and how our inherent qualities enable us to navigate potential conflicts, finding common ground and resolution in everyday interactions.

Micro-Aggressions and Imposter Syndrome

The 'RICS Women in Surveying: Insights Report' highlights that the key barriers to women in industry include imposter syndrome, work life balance and mental health and wellbeing.

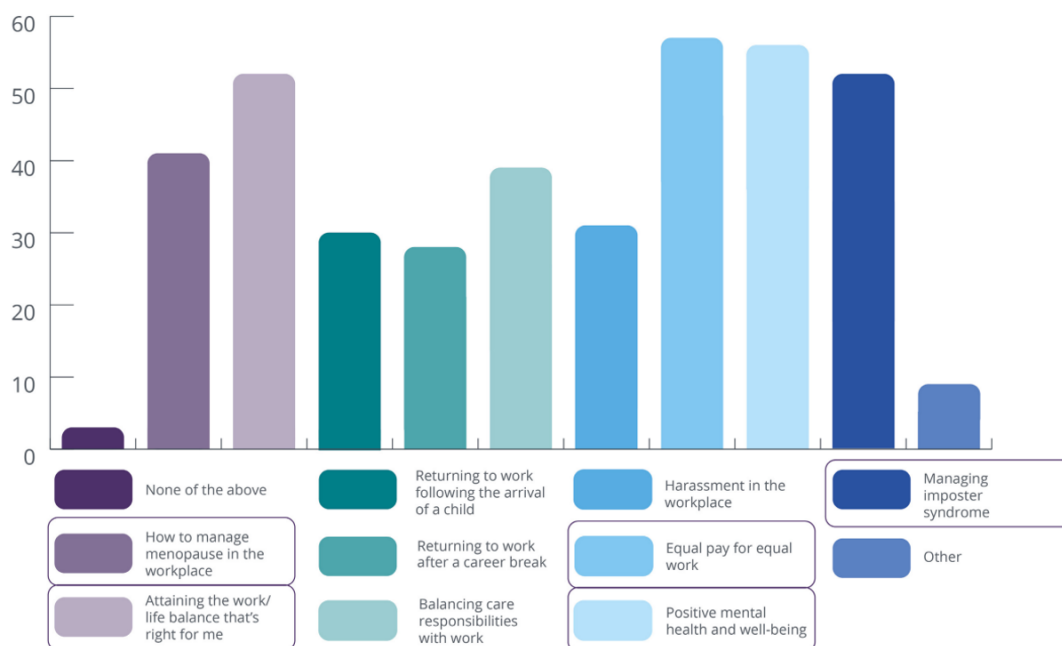


Figure 1: Topics Impacting Women, adopted from the RICS Women in Surveying: Insights Report

For me, the imposter syndrome piece certainly resonates. I believe a reason for this is due to the many microaggressions that are faced by women in the workplace. I recall an instance where, sat in a project meeting as the only woman, I was asked by a client whether I would be taking notes and told to make tea. I was the highest qualified person in the room, but this action had an immediate impact on my confidence. Thankfully, my role and seniority were pointed out by a male colleague, who offered to take the minutes. This act of allyship

highlighted to me the important role male colleagues must take in calling out unconscious bias and proactively advocating. It is not about giving female colleagues a head start, but about removing the hurdles from the track, so we all run the same race. Equity, not equality.

A recent McKinsey report on ‘Women’s experience in the workplace’ has found that, “Years of data show women experience microaggressions at a significantly higher rate than men: they are twice as likely to be mistaken for someone junior and hear comments on their emotional state”.



Figure 2 – Women’s personal experiences in the workplace, adopted from: McKinsey: Women in the Workplace 2023 - <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>

I can reflect on numerous such examples of these negative behaviours, as can all my female colleagues, and unfortunately, whilst the allyship I experienced in the above example is still too rare, thankfully poor behaviours are increasingly being called out.

The impact of micro-aggressions on our individual perception of self-worth.

The compounding impact of such microaggressions causes women to question their worth in the workplace. Professionally, I have always held a degree of self-doubt about my ability to step up into new roles, or to apply for more senior opportunities. Imposter syndrome causes us to undervalue our contributions. We attribute our success to external factors and set unrealistic expectations upon ourselves. The impact is then self-sabotage before we begin. We either negatively manifest failure, or don’t even apply for roles we have every ability to be successful in. Before applying for my current role, I had a lot of conversations as to whether I should go for it. I wasn’t sure I was ready and could see a sea of potential candidates who I convinced myself were better qualified. Luckily my allies and mentors persuaded me to go for it. One phrase which has resonated with me since is, ‘What would a mediocre white man do?’. This isn’t an indictment of any demographic, but an aspiration for everyone to believe in themselves, as they deserve a seat at the table. We need to get past imposter syndrome. I know that is difficult, but by throwing ourselves into new

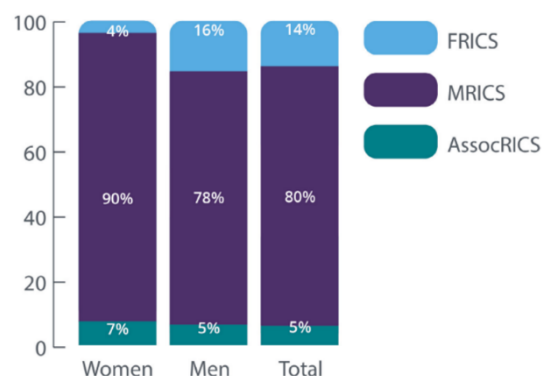


Figure 3: Adopted from the RICS Women in Surveying: Insights Report shows that far less women are presently fellows than men.

challenges and succeeding, or learning from where we fail, we come to learn our value.

Just going for it!

Again, my journey to achieving fellowship was progressed thanks to the encouragement of others. Upon realisation that I met the criteria I decided to apply early. My decision to apply was, in large parts, due to the increased confidence I had built up thanks to the backing and support of others. The typical requirement for the Fellowship is five-years post chartership, but I secured it on my first attempt in less than three. I think once you start the ball rolling on these things, it feels like it snowballs in a positive trajectory, and that in turn has a wonderful impact on your mental health and wellbeing. Women are significantly under-represented at FRICS level, and I am proud to be part of the group of incredible women who are changing that.

I can only hope that seeing us in these roles, as visible figures in senior positions, acts as a source of inspiration to other aspiring women. The importance of this was highlighted in the RICS Women in Surveying: Insights Report. It noted that the principal way to support women in construction is to have more women in senior roles. I recall at the start of my career asking for a list of all the senior Qs to organise an

RICS structured training programme. I was disappointed that there were no women on that list. This challenge is further supported by the findings of the McKinsey Women in the Workplace 2023 report. *“For the ninth consecutive year, women face their biggest hurdle at the first critical step up to manager. This year, for every 100 men promoted from entry level to manager, 87 women were promoted”*.

We aim to ensure that our interview panels are diverse and representative. I have twice received feedback from women who had multiple offers, but they accepted my offer on the basis that they had never been interviewed by a woman before. There has been similar feedback to my visibility as an RICS assessor, and that it was inspirational not to be sat opposite three men on the chartership panel. Further highlighting the need to “see it to be it”.

The importance of mentorship

I would also like to reflect on the role mentors have played in my journey. I will self-admit that, even despite being a later entrant to the profession, I spent the first years of my career as somewhat of a ‘coaster’, with little direction or ambition. It was a profession I initially entered as my uncle suggested it as a rewarding career, rather than a real passion from the outset. Thankfully, I had mentors who invested their time in me, training me, showcasing specialisms and imparting their lived experiences to my daily challenges. Even tearing apart the first drafts of my APC submission provided me with the constructive feedback I needed to learn from failure.

The strength of female qualities in conflict avoidance and resolution

The challenges and barriers faced by female professionals in Quantity Surveying draw parallels to those in the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) field. The 2019 Centre for Dispute Resolution (CEDR) report on ‘Improving diversity in commercial mediation’ found that only

one third were female, and only 7% under the age of 40. There were almost as many mediators over the age of 70 (6%), with one of the five barriers to the profession being getting experience early.

However, I am determined that the qualities females possess, sometimes perceived as weaknesses, are the exact traits needed to be successful in both QS and ADR disciplines. Our disposition to be active listeners that invite openness, rather than demanding to be heard, is a underrated quality for opening up meaningful avenues of dialogue, inviting pertinent questions and absorbing shared information. We excel at inclusiveness, as highlighted in a Cambridge University study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences journal - *"No matter where they live in the world, no matter what their cultural or family influences: In general, women are better at empathizing with other people than men"*. The legacy experience of exclusion leads us to seek to promote, rather than shut down others. Again, this means that we are excellent at shifting narratives and sentiments to a place of openness, honesty, collaboration and resolution.

A final reflection from me would be, "ladies, if you're on the fence, go for it, what have you got to lose? You more than likely have a whole lot to gain".