

Gender Stereotypes: A Barrier for Career Development of Women in Construction

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Abstract

Although women representation in managerial positions is gradually increasing, the phenomenon of women being restricted to lower levels, under the glass ceiling effect is still valid in many countries. Different studies in several countries show that the increase of women in managerial positions is unbalanced compared to the total number of the workforce. According to the recent statistics, women managerial representation is less than 1% of the total construction work force in the UK.

Several barriers for women's career advancement have been identified, most notably gender stereotypes. The stereotypical belief is that if women in managerial positions possess traditional male characteristic it is a better predictor for success, which reinforces the belief of "think manager-think male" and this discriminates women from reaching the higher positions with characteristics commonly associated with females. Since construction is one of the highest male dominated industries, the effect of stereotypes as a barrier for women's career progression in construction is salient.

This paper reviews academic literature on gender stereotypes and its consequent effects on women managers. It attempts to discover the pertinent issues for women in the construction industry in order to reduce the stereotypical image.

Keywords: Construction Industry, Stereotypes, Women

Introduction

The representation of women in many industries decreases with an increase of seniority of the position. Women occupy junior and supporting positions within high status professions (Dainty 1998 cited Gurjao ca2006). Improving women's participation in leadership roles is part of the struggle to enhance the rights, freedoms, and opportunities of all women globally. The advancement of women into positions of power and influence in organisations is essential if women are to achieve equality of opportunity worldwide (Schein 2007).

The UK construction industry is one of the strongest in the world, with annual output ranked in the global top ten (Gurgao 2006). Not only it is one of the largest industries in the UK but also it provides an enormous amount of employment opportunities. The construction industry in the UK provides a tenth of the country's gross domestic product and is a substantial employer, with over two million people employed (DTI 2003b; CITB 2003a cited Gurgao 2006). It is a unique industry, which is linked with everyone's life. Construction industry is one of the highest male dominated industries in the world. Its male representation is more than 90% (Fielden et al. 2000). Although, the opportunities for women in the construction industry appear to be increasing, they are still extremely limited (Fielden et al. 2000).

In recent years, the UK construction industry has clearly made a conscious effort to increase the number of women that it attracts, both in order to mitigate skills shortages, and also to benefit from the advantages that workforce diversity could bring to the sector (Dainty et al. 1999). 6 percent of the 15 percent of the staff in the professional and managerial levels in the UK construction industry are women (Greed 2000) while in the "managerial and administrative category" women are concentrated in specialist positions (including personnel and public relations) rather than main stream management (Fielden et al. 2000).

A major barrier to women's progress in management worldwide continues to be the gender stereotyping of the managerial position (Schein 2007). Berthoin and Izraeli (1993, p. 63 cited Schein 2007) in an overview of women in management worldwide stated that "probably the single most important hurdle for women in management in all industrialised countries is the persistent stereotype that associates management with being male. Since construction is highly a male dominated industry, the expectation that males are better managers is strongly reinforced in the industry.

Several studies have been carried out to identify the role of stereotypes as a barrier for women's advancement to managerial and leadership positions. These studies include the cross-cultural comparisons of gender stereotypes regarding women managers and the changes of stereotypes with time. The following sections of this paper attempt to gather different research views of the past studies in order to understand the significance of gender stereotypes as a barrier for women's career advancement in the construction industry.

Overview of gender stereotypes and their influence on women managers

What are gender stereotypes?

Gender stereotypes are categorical beliefs regarding the traits and behavioral characteristics ascribed to individuals based on their gender. They serve as expectations about the attributes and behaviors of individual group members (Cleveland et al. 2000 cited Bono and Duehr 2006). Gender is used to describe the cultural, social and psychological traits of individuals as masculine or feminine based on typically for each sex but which may be ascribed to traits of either biological sex (Claes 1999 cited Vinnicombe and Singh 2002).

On the other hand, some views say that gender is not the only basis for stereotypes. Not only does biological sex activate gender role stereotypes, but other cues that are part of a global, multi-faceted gender role stereotype can also activate the attribution of leadership. A multidimensional conception extends the formerly trait-based view of gender stereotypes and opens a more differentiated perspective. According to this conception, stereotypes are composed of diverse components, such as traits, role behaviors, occupations and physical appearance (Deaux & Kite 1993; Deaux & Lewis 1983, 1984; Freeman 1987; Jackson & Cash 1985 cited Sczesny and Stahlberg 2002). While the salience of a person's biological sex is often considered sufficient for the activation of the corresponding stereotype components, the work of Deaux and Lewis (1984 cited Sczesny and Stahlberg 2002) suggests that gender-stereotyped physical characteristics (e.g. broad shoulders versus dainty physique) can outweigh sex as a basis of judgment. Their results show that the components of gender stereotypes differ in their ability to implicate other components, with physical appearance playing a dominant role (see also Freeman 1987 cited Sczesny and Stahlberg 2002). Gender stereotypes can be described as the characteristics, attitudes, values and behaviours that society specifies as appropriate for the particular gender. The differences may have arisen not just from biological differences but also from sex role socialisation during childhood and the way in which men and women develop psychologically. (Gilligan 1982 cited Vinnicombe and Singh 2002).

Occupational gender stereotypes

An occupational stereotype is a form of sex-role stereotyping, that is, a set of assumptions about the sorts of activities and interests that are associated with the roles of men and women in society. Sex segregation effectively creates a class of jobs which is then subject to societal stereotypes (Gutek 1988 in Miller, Neather, Pollard and Hill 2004a cited Gurgao ca2006). Individuals by and large perceive an occupation as being performed principally by men or by women, and then believe it must require masculine or feminine attributes in order for an individual to be effective within that role (Gurgao, ca2006). Occupational gender-stereotyping is important to consider because of labour market outcomes especially in terms of recruitment, hiring, pay, promotion, etc. that may result from them. Further, gender-stereotyping of occupations may discourage individuals from pursuing careers in occupations

typed as gender-inappropriate for them, even though they may actually be well-suited for such careers (Gatton and DuBois *et al.* 1999 cited Gurgao ca2006).

Gender stereotypes has consistently demonstrated that men are generally seen as more agent and more competent than women, while women are seen as more expressive and communal than men (Duher and Bono 2006; Sczesny and Stahlberg 2002). The stereotypical beliefs about women in managerial positions generate the idea that having the traditional male characteristic is a better predictor for success, thus reinforcing the belief to “think manager-think male” (Schein as cited in Sauers *et al.*, 2002 cited Cortis and Cassar 2005). Consequently, stereotypical notions perceive women who had achieved key managerial positions, as being successful imitators of characteristics believed to be utterly a male domain (Coates, 1998; Stanford *et al.*, 1995 cited Cortis and Cassar 2005).

Gender stereotypes are thus keeping women at a minority in managerial positions. This is a dangerous stance, since it may also lead to the “strength in number” hypothesis as proposed by Kanter (as cited in Jacobs, 1995 cited Cortis and Cassar 2005). Kanter explains that because women in managerial positions are not proportionately represented in organizations, they are in a vulnerable position, simply because they are in a minority. Subsequently, women in managerial posts are usually viewed as tokens (Milwid, 1990; Simpson, 2000 cited Cortis and Cassar 2005). This means that they have fewer political allies, fewer mentors and less role models. Yet, ironically, they are more visible and they face a greater chance to be viewed stereotypically. Furthermore, stereotyped expectations can lead individuals to behave in the expected manner, consequently, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Carr-Ruffino, 1993; Echabe and Gonzalez Castro, 1999 cited Cortis and Cassar 2005).

Have stereotypes changed?

Researches have been carried out to study the nature of stereotypical beliefs regarding the characteristics required by successful managers and their change with time. The results of the studies carried out by Virginia E. Schein in early 1970s confirmed a relationship between gender stereotypes and perceptions of requisite management characteristics. In 1973, Schein developed the Descriptive Index to assess the extent to which men and women were perceived to have the requisite personal characteristics expected for management positions (Duher and Bono 2006). Using a broad list of adjectives, Schein found that the characteristics of successful middle managers were much more similar to the characteristics commonly ascribed to men in general and not at all like the characteristics attributed to women in general. Schein (1975) replicated these results with a sample of female managers, demonstrating that it was not only males who held gender stereotypes in the workplace (Duher and Bono 2006).

According to Schein (2007), in 1970s, among males there was a strong resemblance between the ratings of men and that of managers and a near zero resemblance between the ratings of women and that of managers and the outcomes of this study have showed that gender stereotyping was a major barrier to women’s entry in to management in the USA. Characteristics such as leadership ability, desires responsibility, and objectivity were seen as

requisite management characteristics and more likely to be held by men than by women. To “think manager” was to “think male,” and this view worked against women seeking to enter and advance into management positions (Schein 2007).

In a key extension of the Schein paradigm approximately 15 years after the original research, Heilman et al. (1989) examined the extent to which gender stereotypes persisted in organizations. Heilman et al. (1989) replicated Schein’s (1973) original work and found stereotypical views about the characteristics of men in general, women in general, and successful managers at a level that closely paralleled Schein’s (1973) findings, suggesting little change in the stereotypes of male managers over time (Duher and Bono 2006). Further, Heilman et al. (1989 cited Duher and Bono 2006) found that the gender stereotypes were considerably weaker when more information was provided about the managerial success of women. Brenner et al. (1989) replicated the original Schein studies using both male and female management samples. They found no evidence of changing stereotypes among male managers; however, female managers rated both men and women as similar to successful managers. This disparity between male and female respondents was due largely to differences in their view of women, not in their view of successful managers (Duher and Bono 2006). This pattern of findings led Schein (2001) to conclude, “In the United States many people believed that as women moved into management, managerial sex typing would diminish. And it did, among women. But men have continued to see women in ways that are not complimentary vis-à-vis succeeding in positions of authority and influence” (p. 684) (Duher and Bono 2006). Duher and Bono (2006) examined gender and management stereotypes of male and female managers and students in order to test the notion of subsequent change in perceptions of women as leader-like with the increase of the number of women in management roles and the greater emphasis on diversity in organisations. According to these researchers, the results suggest that stereotypes about women may be changing. Male managers, in particular, seem to be characterizing women as less passive and submissive and more confident, ambitious, analytical, and assertive. In short, male managers—the individuals who serve as the gatekeepers to most executive suites—are rating women as more leader-like than they did 15 and 30 years ago. Men generally tended to view women (in general and women managers) as possessing fewer of the characteristics of successful managers. Our results suggest that female managers view women as more similar than men to successful managers.

Schein (2007) indicates, compared to attitudes held in the 1970s, female managers and female management students no longer gender type the managerial position. They see women and men as equally likely to possess characteristics necessary for managerial success. No longer influenced by stereotypical thinking, these managers would be expected to treat men and women equally in selection, placement, and promotion decisions. On the other hand, the male managers and male management students of today hold attitudes similar to those of male managers in the 1970s. Despite all the societal, legal, and organisational changes that occurred in the USA over the last 30 years, male managers continue to perceive that successful managerial characteristics are more likely to be held by men in general than by women in general.

Cultural differences of stereotypes

The cross cultural studies by Schein show there are no much cultural differences of the stereotypes on managers. The results of these studies revealed that managers are seen as possessing characteristics more commonly ascribed to men than to women in USA, Germany, the UK, China, and Japan. Among males in all five countries, there was a high resemblance between the ratings of men and managers and a low, often close to zero resemblance between the ratings of women and managers (Schein 2007). Schein (1996 cited Sauers et al. 2002) concluded that “think management-think male” is a global phenomenon, especially among males. New Zealand, being a country where women hold a high profile in employment and education, still perceives the above phenomenon is true (Sauers et al. 2002).

Gender stereotypes as a barrier for women in construction

To the extent that managerial position is viewed as “male” in gender-type, the characteristics required for success are seen as more commonly held by men than by women (Schein 2007). Thus, gender stereotypes start acting its role from the beginning of a woman’s career in the construction i.e. at the entry to the industry. According to Adeyemi et al. (2006), research efforts into women participation in construction in the developed countries have revealed empirically quite a number of socio-economic and cultural constraints inhibiting women’s entry into construction. These constraints can be summarised as: Male dominated culture, outright sex discrimination (stereotyping) and intimidation of female workforce, smaller proportion of women training in construction and allied fields, poor image of construction industry, hard and inflexible working conditions, competitiveness of construction business and women’s lack of self confidence. So that it is more difficult for a woman to compete with her male counterparts at the stages of recruitment and promotions regardless of the necessary qualifications and experiences. Schein (2007) states, gender stereotyping of the managerial position fosters bias against women in managerial selection, placement, promotion and training decisions. This phenomenon makes women who wish a successful career in the construction industry constrained from achieving their targets. It has been found that gender stereotypes are salient in organizations as a potential barrier to advancement (Bono and Duehr 2006).

Gender stereotypes are considered as one of the direct antecedents of discrimination at work (Dovidio & Hebl 2005 cited Bono and Duehr 2006). Since the construction culture is extremely male dominated and it is viewed as a highly gendered activity, it is hard for women to survive in the industry exhibiting the commonly associated feminine qualities with females. Eagly and Johnson (1990 cited Vinnicombe and Singh 2002) showed that women managers in male dominated industries tended to emulate more stereotypically masculine leadership styles. The industry expects the employees to be more dominant and aggressive instead of being compassionate and concerned with the welfare of others. Prejudice attitudes towards female supervisors include the belief that women do not make good leaders since the model of the successful manager is based on masculine traits (Burke and Collins, 2001; Cabral-Cardoso and Fernandes, 2003; DeMatteo, 1994; Marongiu and Ekehammar, 1999; O’Leary

and Ryan, 1994 cited Cortis and Cassar 2005). For females, if the perceived criteria for successful managers are based on male stereotypes, then that may lead them to withdraw from the competition, even if they have genuine managerial and leadership talent and qualifications (Vinnicombe and Singh 2002).

Ways of reducing gender stereotypes in construction organisations

Senior women are rare in many male-dominated companies, so that many women managers have few role models. The glass ceiling may be moving upwards but it is still influencing women's perceptions of leadership attributes as they see mostly male leaders in action. As women aspire to more senior positions, they have to consider how their own behaviours and perceptions fit with those associated with successful careers in their organisations (Davidson and Cooper 1992; Morrison et al 1987 cited Vinnicombe and Singh 2002). Many people believe that as women move into management, managerial gender typing will diminish (Schein 2007). Social role theory posits that the influx of women into the workforce and management positions reflects a redistribution of social roles, which should subsequently affect the characteristics typically attributed to women (Duher and Bono 2006). Thus to decrease the effect of gender stereotypes regarding women managers perceived by both women managers themselves and the others, it is necessary to attract more women to the construction industry.

Legal pressures perform a considerable role to bring equality and mild the effect of stereotypes or change the stereotypes by performance. The past several decades have included changes in the legal environment in USA (e.g., Civil Rights Act of 1964, affirmative action) and associated changes in the extent to which organizations focus on equal opportunity employment practices, both as a function of legal guidelines and as a movement toward fostering diversity as a business goal (Rynes & Rosen 1995 cited Duher and Bono 2006). Therefore, government initiatives and policies should be enforced and implemented in the construction industry to bring more women into the industry and to make the prevailing stereotypes mild.

Rynes & Rosen (1995 cited Duher and Bono 2006) state, it is clear that the social environment with respect to women has been changing. These environmental changes suggest two possible reasons why gender stereotypes may be changing, especially for women in management. The first possibility is that a gradual change in gender stereotypes may be occurring due to changing social roles (e.g., more women at work and in management and executive positions). The second possibility is change due to organizational interventions, such as diversity training aimed at decreasing gender stereotypes and other prejudiced attitudes (Duher and Bono 2006). A recent study by Rudman, Ashmore, and Gary (2001) examined the impact of diversity education on stereotypes and prejudices, and found that training can reduce the biases of gender stereotypes at multiple levels. Not only did diversity education lead to a decrease in directly reported, explicit stereotypes, but such education also reduced implicit stereotypes, which occur on an automatic, unconscious level (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995 cited Duher and Bono 2006). Therefore, it is clear that training can be used as an effective device to reduce gender

stereotypes in organisations by increasing awareness and appreciation of differences between individuals.

According to Johnson and Powell (1994), the decision-making characteristics of males and females in a 'non-managerial' population in which the majority of individuals have not undergone formal management education are contrasted with a 'managerial' population of potential and actual managers who have undertaken such education. It is argued that women are often excluded from managerial positions of authority and leadership due to stereotypes, which have been constructed by observing 'non-managerial' populations at large. This implies that it is necessary to assess the leadership attributes and management qualities of women managers in order to decide their successfulness. So that a comprehensive study on women managers in the construction organisations can reform the existing gender stereotypes, which shows masculine characteristics create better managers in the industry.

Conclusions

The gender stereotypical belief of “think manager-think male” is predominantly found in organisations irrespective of the era, sector or culture of the country. It still holds women with feminine characteristics back in moving up the career ladder. Apropos, feminine characteristics are believed to be essential bringing diversity into organisations.

The culture in the construction industry is extremely male dominated. As a result of this, gender stereotypes are salient in construction organisations as direct antecedents of discrimination of women at work. The norm characteristics of managers in construction are perceived as masculine. They restrict women from entering, promoting and training in the industry. The lack of female role models, diversity training and poor implementation of initiatives and policies on equal opportunities can be identified as the main barriers to reduce prevailing stereotypes in the industry. In brief, it can be inferred that to improve the status of women's career advancement in the construction industry it is essential to reduce the influence of occupational gender stereotypes on women managers through a holistic approach of organisations, authorities, research and development institutions and society as a whole.

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