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| **How to attract, support and retain more women into the construction industry and improve workplace wellbeing for everyone**This is the eleventh fact-sheet about recent international peer-reviewed research relating to social procurement in the construction industry. This fact sheet summarises a number of research projects which have explored gender equity and diversity in the Australian construction industry and the links this has to workplace well-being. The results of this research summarised below have been published in a number of leading international peer-reviewed papers which are listed in the footnote of this factsheet. Please feel free to distribute this factsheet to anyone who may be interested.Professor Martin LoosemoreUniversity of Technology, Sydney<https://profiles.uts.edu.au/Martin.Loosemore> |
| **Why the studies*** The construction sector has struggled to increase gender diversity and equity in its workforce, despite many reforms to address this problem.
* Women still account for a very small proportion of the workforce. While the proportion of women in the industry has increased from 16% in 2016 to 25.9% in 2021, retention has become worse over the same period with resignations increasing from 18.4% to 28.2%. In contrast, male resignations decreased from 81.6% to 71.8% and women continue to leave the industry at a far higher rate than men (around 36%) and this rate is increasing rather than decreasing.
* Research shows that while the best firms have made efforts to address these problems, there remain significant formal and informal barriers to employment and career progression for women.
* The industry is also characterised by a highly masculinised and sometimes toxic culture which presents significant risks to health and well-being for both women and men.
* While there is also a growing recognition of the need to address wellbeing in the workplace, there is a tendency to try and ‘cure the individual’ through generic solutions which seek to ‘improve employees’ lifestyle and behaviours and responses to stress, rather than addressing the underlying organisational causes.
* Beyond the many moral and ethical reasons to address these problems, there are increasing regulatory imperatives in the form of gender equity targets in social procurement and reporting requirements and the industry is facing a severe skills shortage which threatens the delivery of our critical construction and infrastructure pipeline.

**Aim*** The aim of this research was to investigate why policies and strategies to attract, retain and support the progression of women professionals in construction have largely failed and what this means for women’s and men’s workplace wellbeing.
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| **What we did*** This research employed a rapid ethnography approach to data collection which involved a team of researchers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds (construction, gender, sociology and political science) undertaking targeted key-informant interviews and observations with a range of male and female professionals working in the construction industry.
* The research analysed: 69 company policies; interviewed 21 senior female and male business leaders and 61 (37 men and 24 women) project management personnel across six major construction sites; observed 14 company events (e.g. diversity training, graduate assessment centres, mentoring initiatives); and undertook onsite shadowing of 44 men and women construction professionals.
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| **What we found*** Business leaders and managers have variable understanding of gender equality initiatives. Project leaders and line managers play a central role in the careers of employees yet are often reluctant to take responsibility for gender equality policies. Despite many formal policies, beneath the surface of construction companies there remains a subtle culture of denial and resistance with regards to diversity and equality initiatives.
* In terms of recruitment, women are much more likely than men to be recruited through formal recruitment channels. Most men are recruited through informal networks which are the main way in which people get a job in the industry. Companies focus on ‘cultural fit’ into an industry with a highly masculine culture. Male sponsorship is important to recruitment and recruitment onto projects routinely operates through a practice of male-to-male sponsorship and ‘picking your team’. This undermines women’s access and opportunities in the industry.
* In terms of retention, employees’ value is demonstrated through their adherence to rigid work practices that include long hours, ‘presenteeism’ and total availability. As a result, women - who continue to carry the greatest caring responsibilities - are often left to choose between a career in construction or a family. Rigid work practices undermine employee wellbeing and work life balance for both women and men. Parental leave is seen as a resource cost to construction projects and as a female (rather than male) entitlement. There is also resistance to affirmative action practices (e.g. targets, quotas) by men (and some women), as these are perceived to advantage women. Women across different levels highlighted a lack of mentoring, sponsorship and career support as significant factors that contribute to feelings of isolation and exclusion. Despite formal parental leave policies, individual women have to strategize and negotiate their departure, return and career ‘survival’. Industry culture operates to remind women – subtly and overtly – of their gender and difference, frustrating and exhausting women over time. There are widely accepted norms that women will do the administrative work, and other practices that make women feel they are intruding in a male-dominated space.
* Construction sites are overwhelmingly a masculine space. Men dominate influential positions and masculine norms and practices including the acceptance of aggressive and combative exchanges, swearing and resistance to flexible work hours are ever present. There is a tolerance for sexism with sexist comments, sexist graffiti and of homophobia and racism.
* In terms of well-being, poor mental health is a significant issue for many construction professionals. Many men and women report being stressed, fatigued, having sleeping and relationship issues, stress related health issues, having anxiety attacks and feeling depressed. Young people report considering a move out of contracting for better hours. Physical safety on site is generally valued over wellbeing and the challenge of achieving an effective work-life balance was most pronounced for fulltime employees with children with long hours away from home putting a strain on relationships with children and partners, and for young people having to balance study and work. These pressures intensify at later stages of construction projects when managers and employees push to get projects finished on time and budget, often at a personal cost to themselves and their families. These pressures are especially acute in project-based roles and this is also where gendered institutions are most apparent and intense. Current individual-based approaches to improving wellbeing are no match for the risks posed by the industry’s culture.
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| **What this means**The research shows that while large construction companies are actively piloting a range of initiatives to support gender diversity and initiatives, wellbeing initiatives and gender targets, there is much more work to do.While construction clients have a major role to play in the way they procure, risk manage and resource projects, some recommendations from this research which could be used to facilitate and monitor the implementation of gender requirements in social procurement policies include: * Those in operational roles with power and status (company and project leaders) need to ‘own’ and take responsibility for gender equality.
* Company policies and initiatives need to address work practices that act to undermine women’s inclusion and women and men’s wellbeing.
* Companies need to address all three stages of women’s careers (recruitment, retention and progression), recognizing that all three are inextricably linked.
* A gendered lens needs to be applied to new and existing policies and practices, to recognise that sometimes practices and policies have unintended gendered consequences.
* Companies need to review the values that underpin ‘cultural fit’ to determine if they are gendered and exclusionary.
* Broaden the recruitment pipeline by ensuring that graduates from other built environment and non-cognate degrees (architecture, landscape architecture, business, humanities etc.) have access to the graduate recruitment initiatives.
* Hold recruitment drives – specific to women not from the traditional pipeline and set recruitment, progression and retention targets and a strategy to deliver these targets.
* Make company and project recruitment and promotion processes more transparent. Recognise, promote and celebrate agile and diverse career pathways and career breaks. Introduce a sponsorship program for women in low to mid-levels.
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* Where possible, ensure that women in construction professionals work with at least one other woman construction professional on site, in training, at events – to avoid them being the only woman.
* Stop rewarding and promoting excessive hours and ‘shaming’ those who don’t comply with excessive hours. Plan for flexibility, wellbeing and parental leave. Introduce and champion different ways of working on construction sites including, job sharing, part-time and rosters. Ensure all impending parents and line managers know the procedure around parental leave and ensure it is planned for and resourced in projects and that it does not damage the career progression of those men and women who chose to take it. Review and recognise the effects of ‘target’ and ‘stretch’ programs on employee’s wellbeing and productivity
* Demonstrate ‘no tolerance’ of sexism, racism and homophobia in the workplace (including the site).
* Recommendations to improve the problems we found include:
* Make company and project recruitment processes and criteria more formalized and transparent. Review the values that underpin ‘cultural fit’ to determine their gendered dimensions and contribution to exclusionary practices. Initiate recruitment drives specific to women not from the traditional pipeline and provide these recruits with construction training.
* Make promotion processes and criteria more transparent. Change the narrative. Recognise, recruit and celebrate agile and diverse career pathways and career breaks. Encourage and support women into project management career paths.
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