



OPINION

Women in construction: government can do more to shake up the 'boys club'

By Natalie Galea and Abigail Powell

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Alison Mirams didn't see how demanding the construction industry was until she had her son.

Then, she realised partners of workers in the sector are like "single parents six days a week".

Tight deadlines mean long hours, Monday through Saturday, are the norm in construction, making it difficult to retain women.

As chief executive of Sydney-based Roberts Pizzarotti, Alison is looking at improving diversity in construction from several angles, and one of these is changing work practices to make it a more viable career for parents.

Her staff are given the technology to do their paperwork during their commute and are encouraged to go home at 3pm at least one day a week.

Australia's biggest boys' club

Construction is Australia's third largest employer and most male-dominated sector.

In 2016, men made up 88 per cent of the construction workforce: 99 per cent of construction tradespeople and 86 per cent of construction managers and professionals.

Early in her career, Alison had the support of a person of influence in the sector, who helped her grow from a contract administrator to a director.

But Alison's is a rare case. Women leave construction 38 per cent faster than their male colleagues, and rarely reach management.

Three things keep women away

Our research finds that three factors undermine women's recruitment, retention and progression in construction.

1. Long work hours.

A typical construction manager arrives on site at 6.30am, leaves after 6.30pm and does more work from home, six days a week.

A culture of "presenteeism" makes construction careers challenging for most people, but especially those with care responsibilities.

There is little tolerance for those who won't commit, and part-time, shared or flexible work doesn't exist. The problem is made worse by the push to complete projects on time and within budget, with no recognition by clients, including government, of the effects of these demands on the workforce or gender equality.

2. Sexism.

During the course of our research, we visited six sites across Australia. In the main entrance of one site, a safety sign noted there was a "penetration behind", and underneath was scribbled "Brooke LOL".

The construction manager said he had not even noticed the graffiti.

Unlike trip hazards that are spotted and rectified, sexist language goes unnoticed and unacted on.

3. Little support to return to work.

Despite the existence of formal parental leave policies in many large construction companies, our research found women had to strategise and negotiate their departure, return to work and career "survival".

In one large company we studied, 50 per cent of women didn't return to work after parental leave. Parental leave was viewed as a cost to construction projects, with little recognition of the value it provided to women's career progression.

Government has the wrong focus

Besides motivated leaders like Alison Mirams, the other key player that can make a huge difference in this area is government.

The federal government alone has committed \$75 billion to transport infrastructure projects in the next 10 years, making it an influential construction client.

But along with state governments, it has prioritised initiatives that focus on tradeswomen only. In NSW for example, the government plans to introduce gender "targets" for tradeswomen working on state infrastructure projects. Their aim is to double the number of tradeswomen from 1 per cent to 2 per cent.

These targets won't change the face of construction.

'Gender on tender'

Instead, we suggest putting "gender on the tender" — meaning that companies competing for government jobs should demonstrate gender equality and employee wellbeing initiatives alongside other critical elements like cost, time and design.

These programs could include roles that are part-time, shared and flexible, equal parental leave for men and women, fatigue monitoring, secure toilets and showers for women on site (still an issue), and zero tolerance of sexism.

Additionally, governments should be aware of the effects of tight deadlines and slim margins on the workforce, and award tenders to contractors that prove they are adequately resourced, with fair and reasonable margins, who operate a five-day work week.

Introducing targets without strategies assumes that construction work practices are good for men and women.

Boosting the number of tradeswomen is necessary but doing this alone fails to deal with the problem, and ignores the majority of the construction workforce: men.

Dr Natalie Galea is a postdoctoral fellow in the Australian Human Rights Institute, UNSW, who delivered construction projects internationally for almost two decades. Associate Professor Abigail Powell, is a leading researcher in equality and social policy at the Centre for Social Impact, UNSW. Their research team also included Professor Louise Chappell and Professor Martin Loosemore.

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