A grounded theory of women's career under-achievement in large UK construction companies

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In response to impending skills shortages and changing employment patterns, the UK construction industry recently has made considerable efforts to attract more women to its professions. However, despite their increasing representation, there are indications that women experience difficulties in developing their careers within the industry. This research investigated the careers of men and women working for large construction companies, in order to establish the gender determined influences on women's career progression. A primarily qualitative methodology was employed for the research, in which career profiles were developed through ethnographic interviews with 41 matched pairs of male and female employees. This allowed the gender specific determinants of careers to be established across a range of different organizations, and from informants at different vocational and life-cycle stages. The analysis resulted in the formulation of a set of eight interrelated theoretical models, from which a theory of women's career development was constructed. The theory reflects the belief that the construction workplace is a competitive and conflictual environment, where women are overtly and covertly discriminated against by men, who use structural systems to undermine their participation. The women interviewed were found to have dealt with these barriers in a way which perpetuated existing work cultures. If reflected throughout the industry, this would suggest the existence of a self-fulfilling cycle of women's continued under-achievement. The paper puts forward the radical proposition that women should not be attracted to the industry unless steps are taken to moderate its exclusionary and discriminatory culture.

Keywords: Women, career development, discrimination, HRM, grounded theory

Introduction: the current position of women in the UK construction industry

The construction industry employs around 1.77 million people, of which under 10% are women (Court and Moralee, 1995). This makes it the most male dominated of all major industrial sectors (see EOC, 1996). The poor image of construction, a lack of role models and knowledge, poor careers advice, gender-biased recruitment literature, peer pressure and poor educational experiences have all been cited as militating against women's entry to the industry (Gale and Skitmore, 1990; Coles, 1992; Johnson *et al.*, 1992; Srivastava, 1992; Bronzini *et al.*, 1995; Wall, 1997). Sommerville *et al.* (1993) identified both structural and image related barriers to women's entrance to the sector, such as facilities, training, career progression, education and the present level of their participation. This reflects construction's unfortunate position as having one of the worst public images of all industries, being synonymous with high cost, low quality and chaotic working practices (Ball, 1988). It

is unsurprising, given this background, that many women view the industry as a male dominated and threatening environment, with an ingrained culture characterized by masculinity, conflict and crisis (Gale, 1992).

As well as the problems associated with the image of the industry, there may be other gender determined factors which influence the number of women entering construction. Wilkinson (1992), for example, found that some 20% of employers believed that construction work was 'unsuitable' for women. Greed (1997) asserted that the need for identification with values of the construction sub-culture blocks the entrance of people and ideas that are seen as different and/or unsettling. Employer prejudices in this regard may manifest themselves through the recruitment process (Morgan, 1992), particularly as recruitment in construction often is informal and through personal contacts (Druker and White, 1996). Other women are made to feel unwelcome, and are not encouraged to develop towards the senior positions from which they could contribute to shaping the built environment (Greed, 1997).

Studies such as Gale's (1994) have suggested that given the opportunity to learn what the industry has to offer in terms of careers, women can be encouraged to enter the sector. This is reflected in recent employment trends and membership data from the professional institutions. These show women's representation as having increased year-on-year since the mid-1980s (Dainty, 1998). Women now comprise around 18% of the undergraduates on construction related courses within the UK (Kirk-Walker and Isaiah, 1996). As such, women are beginning to enter the industry as a result of focused marketing by its professional bodies and institutions. Assuming that such trends continue, the focus of concern now lies with ensuring that equal opportunities exist for women working within the sector, in order that they remain within it in the long term (Yates, 1992; Khazanet, 1996). Accordingly, within the UK, the industry recently has acknowledged the need to be more proactive in retaining women. Latham (1994) recommended that equal opportunities required urgent attention, and the ensuing working group report called for practical action in promoting and mainstreaming equality of opportunity in the industry (CIB, 1996).

Considering the changes to the construction labour market and the advances that women have made in improving their representation, there is now a need to gain a detailed understanding of what the precise nature of the barriers are to women's careers that can lead to their under-achievement. Through this knowledge, it should be possible to develop policies to improve their careers and hence their retention. The paper aims to address this need by identifying the extent of any divergence between the career progression dynamics of men and women, the obstacles to women's careers which lead to such disparity, and initiatives that companies can take to address these issues.

The nature of organizational career development

The paid work aspects of most careers unfold within an organizational context. As such, it is important to understand the processes that influence organizational behaviour and the development of individuals within them (see Hall and Seibert, 1992). Within organizations, careers can be seen to be determined by the mutually interdependent dimensions of structure, culture and individual action. Structure and culture are influenced by the decisions and actions of the individual, while at the same time helping to determine their decisions (Evetts, 1992). This perspective sees individuals as defining their growth throughout their life of work, rather than moving along pre-determined career paths (Sonnenfeld and Kotter, 1982).

Organizations form a cultural system that simultaneously promotes competition and co-operation. Members co-operate to carry out tasks, while competing for limited career openings (Kvande and Rasmussen, 1994). As such, they form arenas for the power and interests of their members to be manifested (Mintzberg, 1983). Gender is fundamental to the culture of organizations, as has been shown in well known studies within other sectors (see Ledwith and Colgan, 1996), and effectively organizations form 'gender cultures', known to be hierarchical, patriarchal, sex-segregated, sexually divided, sex-stereotyped, sex-discriminatory, sexualized, sexist, misogynist, resistant to change, and to contain gendered power structures (Itzin, 1995). It is unsurprising, given this context, that masculinity forms a key element of corporate culture (Hofstede, 1984). Gender determined aspects of organizations that define men's and women's careers are discussed below.

Structural dimensions of careers

Within organizations, two structural aspects set the framework within which employees can develop their careers: the organization structure and the organizational processes which define work patterns (Evetts, 1996). Organizational structures provide motivation for employees in pursuing occupational goals in terms of their psychological fulfilment (see Hall, 1976). The frameworks which link posts and positions within an

organizational hierarchy are known as career structures, which are defined by salary and promotion ladders. Organizational processes comprise the promotion procedures, work patterns and bureaucracy used by organizations which impact on the day-to-day working lives of their employees. Procedures have been shown to be powerful determinants of gender differentiation in achievement in organizations, and particularly because of the way in which they interact with organizational culture (Crompton and LeFeuvre, 1992).

Cultural dimensions of careers

The culture of an organization describes the unique way in which people act and interact within it (Greenwood, 1997). Those who understand the power and politics within such systems are likely to develop more quickly (Hunt, 1992; Kvande and Rasmussen, 1993). Hofstede (1991) contended that cultures create an orderly set of rules which allow work to be carried out in a particular way. This reflects the differential power of workers and managers to create those practices (Robinson and McIlwee, 1991). Human resources managers now claim organizational culture as their 'territory' (Brown, 1995). They manipulate culture through recruitment (control over the types of people that gain entry to the organization), promotions and demotions (control over who reaches positions of influence within the organization), induction and socialization (a strong influence over the social dynamics within the organization), codes of practice, mission statements, and reward/appraisal systems. They aim to remove cognitive and behavioural dispositions which deviate from the norm, and to ensure that employees adopt the organization's values as their own behaviour in pursuit of career goals (Baron and Greenberg, 1990). Organizational cultures present problems for HRM practitioners and researchers alike, as it is the hardest part of the organization to change (Itzin and Newman, 1995), and the hardest to measure (Owen, 1993).

Action dimensions of careers and personal resolutions

When exploring structural and cultural influences on careers, the focus is primarily on what determines or constrains career action (Guntz, 1989). When research focuses on the individual's experiences and actions, an alternative kind of explanatory model results. This is the subjective career associated with the interactionist approach (Evetts, 1996). This approach assumes that constraining forces on careers are mediated by the actor. In effect people develop strategies to deal with the constraints and barriers put in front of them in achieving their career aims. The advantage of using this concept, is that it allows the researcher to take into account that structural and cultural factors will not have an identical effect on every individual. This is because responses to them are dependent on the personal situation and perspectives of the actor (see Crow, 1989).

Methodology

In order to explore the three interrelated dimensions of careers outlined above, and to gain an holistic understanding of the influences on individual career dynamics, a research approach was required which both explored career influences from the individual's frame of reference, and provided an objective assessment of the informants' career dynamics. Accordingly, the research design comprised two concurrent comparative analyses of men's and women's careers from different perspectives, their physical progression dynamics and their subjective careers from the interactionist perspective. An initial progression analysis explored the 'objective' careers of the informants, and the extent of any gender differentiation in their vertical progression rates. Reasons for the emerging career development patterns were explored through an investigation of the informants' 'subjective' careers. This explored the determinants of the informants' careers from their own perspectives, and included influences that originated from outside of the paid work environment, as well as aspects of both the internal and external labour markets.

The method of data collection and analysis was based upon an established methodology used in a comparable study on the Norwegian engineering professions, in which matched pairs of male and female informants were compared in terms of their career experiences, attributes and perceptions (see Kvande and Rasmussen, 1993). A total of 41 pairs of male and female informants took part in the study, who worked for 5 of the top 20 UK contracting companies by turnover, each of which directly employed over a thousand operational staff. Each of the participating organizations operated within a variety of subsectors, from major civil engineering works to minor building and specialist subcontract projects. Three of the companies had operations within Europe, and two had international operations further afield, such as in North America and Asia.

Informants were selected from each of the companies main operating divisions in order to explore career opportunities across the full range of different activities that the companies undertook. A selection of

internationally based employees were included within the sample. These included design and consultancy staff as well as those involved in traditional contracting activities. Most of the informants (n=70) were directly involved in the production function, and occupied construction management or commercial roles. Around half of the participating informants were drawn from the principal research partner, with the remainder being taken from the four remaining companies. The informants selected represented every professional/ managerial woman that agreed to participate from the focus organization, together with a random stratified sample of informants from the other companies. The informants selected were from a range of career stages and professions, in order to reflect the diverse range of employees working for such organizations. They were matched from personnel records and curriculum vitae according to their age, experience, career path and length of service with their present employer.

An ethnographic interview approach was used, in which initially the informants were asked to sketch a graphical representation of their careers, and then to explain the major determinants of their progression at each significant career stage. This allowed a simple assessment of the vertical progression of each informant pairing, and the relationship of this progression with a range of contextual criteria known for every participant (such as their age, employer, division, experience, career path, and marital status). Next, each informant was asked to expand on aspects of their career history and explain the nature and effect of their career determinants. A cumulatively developing research instrument was used, which was adapted to focus on relevant aspects of each informant's career as they were interviewed. The interview transcripts were supplemented by a range of other qualitative data, including work experience diaries which provided longitudinal accounts of the informants' day-to-day career experiences.

Data collection and analysis were carried out within a 'grounded theory' framework. This differs from most empirical research, as the researcher develops theories to explain his/her own observations, which are grounded in the data collected (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thus, the researcher does not impose or test theory developed externally to the specific setting of the phenomena under investigation, but inductively derives theory from the phenomenon that it represents. They become 'grounded' via a systematic procedure of relating the theory back to the original data (see Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Accordingly, all of the data were transcribed verbatim, broken down and then categorized under general conceptual headings within an analytical model developed to reflect the dimensional location of the data

collected (to be indicated in Figure 1). Eight individual theories were derived from the data and placed in context within the model. The linking of these phenomena led to the final grounded theory of women's careers. Each component of the theory was thoroughly grounded within the data to ensure its validity and general applicability within the context of the interview sample. Computer software was used to facilitate the codification and theory construction process. The package used was NUDIST^{TM}, primarily because it was designed for grounded theory techniques (Richards and Richards, 1994; Dainty *et al.*, 1997).

Results

Career progression

The vertical career progression of every informant was mapped against time from the informants' careers accounts. Women were found to have progressed an average of one hierarchical level behind their male peers of similar age and experience. In addition, women's progression could be seen to be more variable than men's, particularly during years three to twelve of their careers, which accounted for their development after they had left company training programmes, through the junior management grades. The transition from junior to middle management appeared particularly problematic for women. This was indicated by their longer tenure in these positions in comparison with their male peers. This accounted for the promotion to the project management level, with overall responsibility for particular contracts. Beyond this stage, when the majority of informants were aged over 35 years, women could be seen to progress in parity with their male peers. In fact, several women had achieved promotion ahead of their male peers beyond this period.

Reasons for the disparity in men's and women's vertical progression were explored during the progression analysis by comparing the rate of the informants' vertical promotion against a range of contextual factors. These included career path (women were over-represented in commercial and in supporting roles which had adversely affected their promotional opportunities), the number of previous employers (women exhibited a greater propensity for inter-organizational mobility which had slowed their development by putting them in a worse position for management succession), the size and nature of projects (men tended to work on larger more prestigious projects which had facilitated their career development), and the informant's self-perception of levels of ambition

and ability (women's were lower, suggesting lower self-confidence and work motivation). Although this simple analysis does not explain the interrelated effect of men's and women's career choices and actions, these findings suggest that women are disadvantaged by their personal decisions, as well as by externally imposed constraints on their careers.

Career determinants

Eight generic analytical categories emerged from the data, which were used to conceptualize the explanations of the under-achievement of women identified from the progression analysis. Relevant data relating to each conceptual category were stored within the simple model shown in Figure 1. Their position within the model was dependent upon whether they formed antecedent, mediating, strategic or outcome variables, and the context of the determinant from the informants' perspectives. Although this model presents an over-ordered conceptualization of the emerging career influencing factors, its use allowed a logical categorization of the determinants of women's careers, and for the findings to be presented in an intelligible format. The positions of the emerging career determinants were classified as follows. *Antecedent variables* (career choice and entrance to the industry): those issues and influences relevant to the informants' entrance and transition into paid work within the sector. *Mediating variables* (contextual and

organizational factors): those issues which defined the nature of careers and career development within the sector, and organization specific determinants related to the structure and culture of the organizations studied. *Strategic variables* (personal needs/circumstances and career strategies): the personal career strategies of the informants in relation to their own needs and expectations and the career opportunities available. *Outcome variables* (resultant dynamics and future expectations): the resultant progression dynamics and perceptions of future opportunities resulting from the informants' career strategies and the constraining factors identified within the earlier issues.

For each of the analytical areas indicated within Figure 1, the emerging findings were extracted from the career accounts and incorporated within eight grounded theory 'paradigm' models. These are summarized below, and comprise descriptions of the causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, actions and likely consequences pertaining to each career determining issue. They represent the key issues which had led to the disparity between men's and women's career dynamics noted from the progression analysis. Clearly, the organizations were large enough to comprise several subcultural environments, some of which differed along professional as well as operational grounds. However, for the purposes of analysis and data reduction/presentation, only the issues which transcended all five of the organizations and their various operational divisions have been included. As such, the
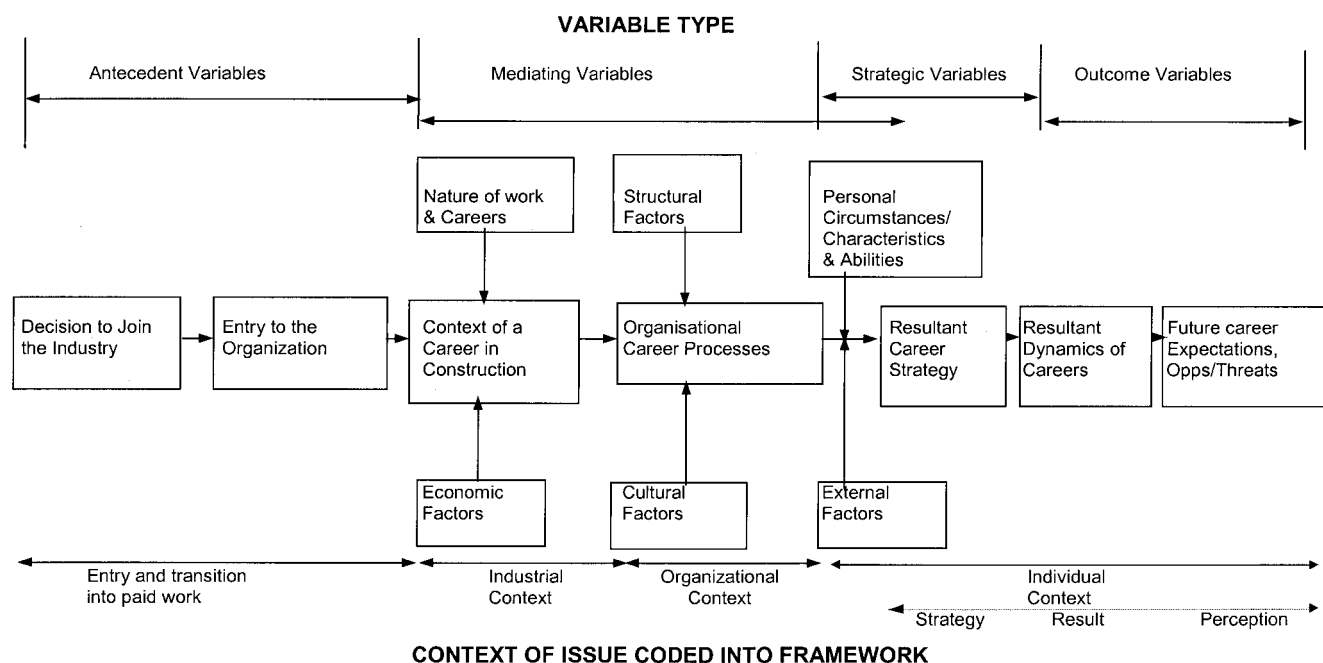

Figure 1 Analytical framework for investigation of careers in construction

results presented below should be viewed as generally applicable to the sector as a whole, and not as restricted to particular companies, divisions or teams.

Phenomenon 1: entrance to the industry

The first phenomenon emerging from the analysis was that: *the younger women became disillusioned with their career choice more rapidly than men, and sought to leave the industry early on in their careers.* This was caused by women having opportunities over-sold to them by targeted recruitment campaigns aimed at attracting them into the industry. Very few had been advised to join the industry by their friends and family, and so they had a poor initial understanding of the culture of the industry and the other inherent difficulties of working in such a male dominated and oriented environment. Women entrants tended to be ambitious and high academic achievers, and so a lack of progression quickly led to dissatisfaction. Construction higher education was found to provide a sheltered environment and an unrealistic interface between career choice and working life within the industry, and so did not prepare women for working within the sector. As such, women were surprised to find that they confronted barriers to their progression such as sexist behaviour, harassment, deliberate attempts to undermine their workplace contribution and work/family conflicts (see phenomenon 5). The result of this was that they tended to seek to move to another subsector of the industry or into a different industry altogether. By contrast, most men had entered the industry as a result of advice from family or friends. As such, they had a good understanding of the nature of the work environment and of the likely career development opportunities. They expressed few regrets over their career choice, as most had chosen construction because of the nature of the work and careers that it offered.

There was little difference in experience between informants from different professional backgrounds, although women in site based positions, and particularly those who worked away from home, expressed the greatest concerns in this regard. Overall, these findings suggest that recent efforts to attract women to the industry may have been misguided, as they have not considered women's experiences of working within the industry. Although fewer women would be attracted without such campaigns, it seems likely that those entering the sector would be more likely to be committed to their careers. This is supported by the few women interviewed who had remained in the industry long enough to reach senior positions (*n*=5). In common with the majority of men, these women had all entered the industry as a direct result of parental influence on their career choice. While higher education had been more problematic for these women

during the late 1960s and 1970s, they maintained a commitment to the sector based on a sound first-hand knowledge of the realities of working within the industry.

Phenomenon 2: entrance to organizations

The second phenomenon emerging from the analysis was that: *most women found the process of entering organizations more problematic than men, both in terms of their initial entry to employment, and in their subsequent attempts to move between different organizations.* The principal cause of this phenomenon was that responsibility for human resources management (HRM) within the companies had been devolved largely to operational line managers. Such managers had firm ideas of the types of people that they wished to recruit, who tended to conform to organizational norms or to their own work ethics (see also Wilkinson, 1993). The informal recruitment and selection processes used by operational managers favoured applicants with existing contacts within the companies to which they were applying. Men tended to use wide networks of contacts to secure positions and good remunerative packages. Women were excluded by stereotyped expectations of their career and personal priorities being made during the recruitment process. Consequently, entry to employment was difficult for women, and especially in their late 20s to early 30s, where ingrained opinions of women's likelihood of having children were held by operational managers with responsibility for recruitment. These male managers used discriminatory recruitment practices, which put many women off applying for new positions within other contracting organizations. Almost half of the women believed that discriminatory recruitment processes were ultimately likely to lead to them having to seek positions in other subsectors of the industry which do not present such resistance to their employment. This was evident from the nature of the interview sample drawn from the companies, as many women had moved to supporting positions, or had requested internal transfers to consultancy divisions within the business which offered a greater level of stability.

Phenomenon 3: context of a career in construction

The third phenomenon emerging from the analysis was that: *gender configurations within the organizations studied were attributable to organizations allocating women to office based support positions.* Site based roles were acknowledged to offer greater scope for gaining responsibility and rapid promotion in the early career stages. Moreover, most women resented the isolating, rigid and oppressive nature of the office environment, and they preferred the flexibility of site based positions.

Even women in their later career stages preferred to maintain a close proximity to technical work, and to their chosen professional role. From these positions they derived a greater level of intrinsic satisfaction, and could demonstrate their ability to male colleagues, many of whom were sceptical of their professional competence and commitment. However, despite women's preferences, organizations prescribed gender roles, in that they tended to allocate female staff to office based support positions, and men to site based positions. The front-line management positions in which men tended to work were shown in the progression analysis to provide better opportunities for promotion than the supporting roles, which women tended to be guided towards.

Phenomenon 4: structural organizational processes

The fourth phenomenon emerging from the analysis was that: *women found developing their organizational careers problematic within operating frameworks which favoured male career patterns and needs. Informal structural systems maintained women's career under-achievement*. De-layered matrix type structures were prevalent at both organizational and project levels within the companies investigated. Although they had positive effects in terms of creating lateral developmental opportunities, they promoted informality in career structures and organizational processes. The organizations were characterized by changing job titles, shifting responsibilities and a frequently changing internal shape. Under these structures, communication was left to informal mechanisms reliant on individuals maintaining a wide network of organizational contacts, and middle management retained control of the staff development of those under their charge. A significant aspect of this control which directly affected women's careers concerned staff allocation, which was seen as being carried out with little regard for employees' personal needs. Many of the women placed in national divisions, for example, found it difficult to combine work with their family lives. This did not present a significant difficulty for men, as their partners often bore the burden of domestic responsibilities and supported their partner's careers. As such, resourcing practices within the companies clearly were based upon male needs, and had not adapted to take account of modern flexible working practices.

Structural systems maintained women's under-achievement. Key amongst these were the companies' performance appraisal systems, which were used as the principal mechanism for monitoring performance, assessing training needs and allocating staff development opportunities. However, effectively they encouraged staff to seek vertical promotion by rewarding behaviour which matched that of the appraising

manager. Moreover, they were used as a vehicle to undermine women's careers by male managers who gave women lower appraisal scores, made unfair assessments of women's training needs, or used them to restrict intra-organizational mobility. Unsurprisingly, men openly stated that they resisted structural change, as they could maintain control and power through their understanding and control of such organizational systems and procedures. Women, however, believed that their only route to senior levels was through entering supporting roles, which had less scope for vertical development, and less potential for them to generate cultural change within the organizations (see phenomenon 3).

Phenomenon 5: cultural organizational processes

The fifth phenomenon emerging from the analysis was that: *the organizations studied militated against women's equal participation and achievement through the maintenance of a workplace environment which excluded and undermined women through the synergy of discriminatory and exclusionary workplace cultures*. The recruitment of ambitious high achieving graduates had led to a competitive work environment within all of the companies. A high degree of competition within the workplace was acknowledged to exist within all five of the companies. Senior male managers were found to control workplace subcultures within the different divisions. They were supported by middle managers who retained direct control of HRM issues at a project level. These men resisted change to procedures which threatened their organizational power, and so women were forced to comply with male-oriented work practices, which further maintained the existing subcultures, and led to difficulties in them combining work and family roles. In addition, organizational edicts on long working hours, requirements for international experience and for gaining further academic qualifications rendered the combination of a fulfilling family life and a successful career impossible. However, of even greater concern was that the competitive workplace environment led to overt resentment from women's male peers and managers. Many women had faced discrimination and harassment, and had been excluded from the social circles acknowledged to be essential to career development in such informal workplace cultures. There was no evidence of men experiencing exclusion from these networking groups.

Phenomenon 6: individual characteristics and circumstances as determinants of careers

The sixth phenomenon emerging from the analysis was that: *most women perceived that they had to make a choice between a career or a family oriented lifestyle. Men were*

more likely to combine successfully their work and family lives. Construction work, and particularly site-based roles in nationally based divisions, were seen as demanding and time-consuming and impinging on social activities and family responsibilities. As such, the majority of men (59%) had supportive non-working partners who took on the responsibility of child care and other domestic duties. Most had accepted the long hours and the geographically transient culture that had developed within the industry, but coped by gaining allocation to regional divisions where they could remain close to their homes. Despite many site based women requesting allocation to regional divisions, proportionally more had been allocated to national divisions which worked throughout the UK. The result of this was that they were forced to adopt career focused lifestyles, or to choose to forgo vocational success (in terms of vertical progression to more demanding roles) in order to have children. Those in office based positions found that such roles did not afford the same career progression opportunities (see phenomenon 3). Proportionately few women (7%) had supportive non-working partners to take on domestic responsibilities. Unsurprisingly, women's career motivation tended to have declined in relation to their experience, as the salience of family issues became more significant, and as they realized the inherent difficulties of combining their work and family lives. Very few women said that they were likely to remain in site based roles and reach high profile project management positions. This was a significant concern as such women could act as role models for potential female entrants in the future.

Phenomenon 7: career strategies

The seventh phenomenon emerging from the analysis was that: *women's career strategies centred on interorganizational mobility within a multi-organization framework. Men's were focused on proactive intra-organizational career development within their existing organization*. The overt and covert actions that women faced which had undermined their careers, had led many to have to expend their efforts in coping with barriers to their continued presence in the contracting environment, or to seeking employment with other companies. This gave them less time to spend in proactively developing their careers within their organization. The progression analysis showed that organizational loyalty was more likely to facilitate rapid vertical career progression than frequent inter-organizational mobility. As such, women's significantly greater inter-organizational mobility patterns had disadvantaged their progression. Men, however, preferred to develop their careers in a familiar cultural and structural environment, and sought intra-organizational development in order to

further their careers. They openly acknowledged that this promoted an even greater understanding and control of structural and cultural systems, as well as improved vertical advancement.

Phenomenon 8: future expectations, opportunities and threats

The eighth phenomenon emerging from the analysis was that: *women embraced the structural organizational and industry-wide change which had affected the industry since the recession. Men opposed such changes and sought to maintain existing hierarchies and work practices*. Men perceived that recent changes in the participating companies had begun to threaten the structures and cultures which had historically reinforced their power and domination within the industry. With the exception of younger graduate entrants, they perceived this as the central threat to their successful career development in the future. In contrast, women perceived structural change as offering the potential to improve the cultural environment of their organizations in the long term. These changes had occurred largely as a result of the economic recession of the early 1990s. They included the de-layering of structures, and improved work practices such as contemporary procurement systems and partnering, which led to less conflictual workplace cultures. However, women also feared that men's resistance to change may lead to a gradual regression towards conflictual methods, which threatened the continued inroads that women were making in the industry. The likelihood of a continued lack of recognition of the benefits that diversified workplaces could provide was believed by women to present the most fundamental barrier to their acceptance within the industry in the future. Many suggested that younger male entrants to the industry, however accepting of change they were at the outset of their careers, were likely to be indoctrinated into maintaining current attitudes and practices by those with influence and control over their development in the early years of their careers.

A grounded theory of gender differentiated career development in large construction companies

Overall, the men and women taking part in this study could be seen to have experienced disparate progression dynamics. This stemmed from the differential effect of structural organizational factors which had restricted opportunities, an incompatibility of construction work with women's expected societal roles, and a culture which militated against women's participation through the maintenance of an

exclusionary and discriminatory work environment. These acted as the key barriers which, in turn, had led to women's employment turnover. As such, the organizations emerged as being both structurally and culturally male in orientation. The progression analysis indicated that only women who showed a long term commitment to the industry, and maintained an unbroken career pattern of around 12–13 years, progressed in parity with their male peers. However, few of the younger female informants believed that they would stay in contracting for such a period.

In order to explain the interaction of these phenomena, a theory is required which is generally applicable to the majority of cases, but which takes account of as wide a range of causal factors emerging from the study as possible. The theory below reflects this by incorporating each of the phenomena described above, which together form four key components which underpin the gender differentiated nature of career progression within the organizations studied. Each component of the theory is outlined below, with the location of the eight preceding phenomena indicated in parentheses.

Components of the theory

Component 1: the development of a competitive sub-culture

A lack of promotional opportunities within the organizations studied was attributable to top-heavy management structures which had led to congested career hierarchies within the middle management levels. Top-heavy structures were a result of re-structuring towards shallow hierarchies where managerial layers had been removed, and to the continued external recruitment of staff to middle management positions. This policy was maintained in each of the companies, as opposed to utilizing succession management policies through internal promotions (which clearly present difficulties for construction companies' HRM departments considering the dynamic and fluid nature of the industry). Low economic output had also reduced workloads which then had an adverse effect on promotion opportunities. The result of this was that companies had a greater choice of potential staff, and showed a propensity to recruit high achieving graduate employees, who were inevitably more ambitious. Accordingly, a competitive subculture had developed, where managers competed for limited promotional opportunities. This had led to the entry to organizations to be more problematic for women, who faced rigorous recruitment procedures and prejudice from operational management with HRM responsibilities (phenomenon 2).

Component 2: structural constraints and cultural values

Recent promotions within the companies studied had tended to be within divisions, and had not involved relocation or intra-organizational mobility. This had resulted in internal vertical development patterns for the majority of younger employees, with an associated limitation in the scope for inter-divisional development. Employee preferences for vertical development patterns were reinforced further by performance appraisal systems, which emphasized the development of the skills and experience necessary for hierarchical promotion. HRM issues were controlled in an informal manner by senior and line management without formal training in HRD (phenomenon 4). Senior divisional managers prevented lateral staff mobility between operating divisions in order to maintain existing subcultural environments, and middle managers used their autonomy and structural mechanisms (such as the performance appraisal systems) to restrict opportunities for women, and to maintain existing hierarchies and work practices (phenomenon 8). When combined with the competitive culture, this resulted in animosity towards women, who were seen as threats to the limited promotional opportunities available within the organizations.

Component 3: discriminatory mechanisms and behaviour to support cultural values

Resentment against women was manifested in overt and covert discriminatory behaviour towards them. These actions ranged from overt harassment and bullying, to covert discrimination in the form of the maintenance of a culture of long working hours and enforced geographical instability. This made it difficult for them to combine work and family roles (phenomenon 5). In responding to such actions, women had to focus their efforts on dealing with barriers put in the way of their continued presence within the organizations. In contrast, men could concentrate on proactively developing their careers through the informal mechanisms available to them. These were based around social interaction, largely taking place outside of work, from which women were also excluded. Poor formal HRM support, a lack of provision of family friendly working practices, and poor organizational communication all contributed towards the male orientation of structural career development opportunities.

Component 4: actions taken in response to organizational constraints

The barriers identified above had a significant impact on women's career strategies. Some 55% of women believed that a choice had to be made between having a successful career or a family oriented lifestyle (phenomenon 6). For those who chose to pursue

their career, some attempted to remain in functional positions from where they could prove their competence to sceptical male managers, even though this was rejected by some male managers (phenomenon 3). However, most believed that progression would be slow for those that remained within a single organization. This had led to increased inter-company mobility for women in comparison with men. However, the benefits of this strategy were misconceived, as vertical progression was shown to be more rapid if construction professionals remained loyal to their employer. Thus, a self-perpetuating cycle had developed within the companies studied, where women focused efforts on coping with their environment, while men concentrated on progressing more rapidly. Through their progression and informal interactions with senior management, men had the potential to increase their organizational power, with which they could maintain women's under-achievement. The only way for women to break this cycle was for them to leave their organization, which actually led to slower progression, lower ambition and to fewer reaching senior positions (phenomenon 7). This led to there being few senior women to act as role models for potential women entrants. As such, these processes contributed to women's under-representation in the industry as well as their under-achievement within the organizations. Finally, the alternative for those who became disillusioned with their careers, was a limited career change to another sector (phenomenon 1). Thus, the processes identified resulted in *occupational* as well as organizational mobility patterns for female employees.

Conclusions

The men and women working for the large construction companies covered by this study experienced disparate career progression dynamics. Women were found to have progressed at slower rates, and to have confronted a greater number of obstacles to their development. This had contributed to a higher turnover of women managers and professionals within these organizations. A range of interrelated structural and cultural factors defined this gender disparity in career development, together with the interactive strategies of men and women in coping with career constraints and exploiting career opportunities. The organizations studied effectively formed arenas for the enactment of discriminatory behaviour, and the eventual exclusion of women. Within these workplaces, women were seen as added competition for limited career opportunities, and as threats to the male dominated and oriented environment. The combined result of these factors was

that the women taking part in this study were found not to have progressed in parity with their male peers in the early-mid stages of their careers. This is likely to lead to poor retention levels.

Previous research has examined the attraction and transition of women into the construction industry, and has shown successfully how barriers to women's wider entrance to the sector can be challenged. However, if the findings of this study are reflected throughout the sector, this suggests that aspects of the industry's culture may represent fundamental barriers to their progression within it. These need to be addressed if women's participation is to be increased in the future. However, the apparent incongruity of women's initial perceptions of the construction industry, and the realities of working life within it, leave doubts as to whether women ought to be attracted to an industry ill-equipped for employing them. The male-oriented discriminatory culture emerging from this study appeared to be so intertwined within the fabric of some construction organizations that it is unlikely to change in the short term. This suggests that these construction companies are likely to remain difficult working environments for women, unless there are fundamental attitudinal changes towards non-traditional entrants. This calls into question recent efforts to increase the participation of women in the industry, which have not been based on empirical evidence of women's opportunities once they have entered it. If the theory developed as part of this study is reflected across the sector, attempts to attract more women ought to be moderated until the structure and culture of its organizations have been developed to become more accepting of their employment. Initiatives aimed at such a change must be capable of manipulating the culture of the construction work environment, as well as removing structural constraints on women's careers.

Acknowledgements

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