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Reducing Harassment for Women in the Professional Construction Workplace with Zero-Tolerance and Interventionist Policies

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ABSTRACT

The construction industry is known for its masculine culture where workplace discrimination, biases, and harassment exist. While interventions such as greater workplace diversity, equity and inclusion programs, and mentoring initiatives are directed towards fostering career engagement and employee retention, women continue to leave professional positions in the construction industry. Using an ethnographic methodology, the aim of this study was to identify and examine the dynamics involved in the perseverance of professional women working in the construction industry. In-depth interviews were conducted, and a qualitative approach towards gathering data was utilized. Consistent questions were posed to the participants primarily through synchronous communications, and specific construction companies and professional women employees were asked to participate. Results suggest that women in leadership positions who previously experienced harassment had male interventionists, and are now serving as the primary interventionists for younger women in their companies. Further results suggest increased women's participation is realized by forming multiple supportive organizational structures within the construction workplace culture and enacting zero-tolerance guidelines to curb inappropriate or harassing behavior. These research findings underscore the need for further exploration of novel interventional mechanisms towards greater retention of women in the industry.

INTRODUCTION

The construction industry is known for its masculine culture, where workplace discrimination, biases, and harassment exist. While interventions such as greater workplace diversity and inclusion programs and mentoring initiatives are directed towards fostering career engagement and employee retention, women continue to leave professional positions in construction organizations (Ayre et al. 2013; Fouad et al. 2011; Gill et al. 2017; Singh et al. 2009; Singh et al. 2018). Harassment has been cited as a career interrupter for women in construction, as many women will leave their organization or profession rather than continue experiencing a hostile work

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environment. The consequences for women's career and financial interruption can be persistent (Gill et al. 2017; Sang and Powell 2012).

While harassment has been mentioned as a career interrupter, other initiatives have been suggested to improve the continuously stagnated women's construction labor pool. Mentorship and internships influence college students of both genders to explore the construction career path based on their interests (Bigelow et al. 2016). However, the industry continues to struggle with a harassment culture indicative of many male-dominated fields, and both women and men believe the workplace culture is challenging (Sang and Powell 2012). The long-hours culture, presenteeism, frequent physical job relocations, and other construction-related career concerns have been cited as reducing women's occupational commitment (Neale et al. 2000; Sang and Powell 2012; Singh et al. 2018).

Using an ethnographic methodology, the aim of this study was to identify and examine the dynamics involved in the perseverance of professional women working in the construction industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many women believe that a company is more progressive when protecting their employees' personal safety, including making multi-level interventions to address a greater degree of macro-level inequalities (Healy et al. 2019). Women's educational attainment and their commitment to their engineering and construction careers has been studied in a multitude of scholarly publications. Findings from Fouad et al. (2016) and Singh et al. (2018), indicate women's commitment to the industry is affected by the supportive workplace and organizational structures which allow women to work within the construction culture confines. In the male-dominated workplace, cultures are more successful in reducing harassment when employing robust interventionist policies and programs. Examples of those interventions include zero-tolerance policies (Gruber 1998).

Harassment and other forms of construction workplace hostility have persistently been cited as a barrier towards increasing women's participation in the male-dominated engineering and construction industries (Fouad et al. 2016; Maskell-Pretz and Hopkins 1997; McLaughlin et al. 2017). Harassment can be situated within "discrimination, power and privilege" (McLaughlin et al. 2012, p. 626), and women find that aggressive situations and mistreatment of employees may create a threatening atmosphere (Fouad et al. 2016; Singh et al. 2018). Further interrogations of the gender dynamics both in the field and on the construction site suggest harassment is a product of the masculine workplace culture and "organizational power networks of men," and an ideology of patriarchy (Olofsdotter and Randevåg 2016, p. 137; Wright 2016).

Women learn to cope with harassing behaviors, and may experience or sense behaviors which are not directed at themselves but at other women (Cross and Bagilhole, 2002). Women experience challenges to their authority and learn to deflect or ignore the experience. This type of coping strategy occurs at all levels of women's construction careers, and often leads to career disruption (McLaughlin et al. 2012). Women who are further along in their careers recognize the development of coping skills as a result of workplace harassment, and the role the gendered organization plays in supporting this process (Healy et al. 2019). Coping serves as a protective and

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preventive measure, whereby women are attempting to maintain a sense of control in day-to-day workplace interactions (Wright 2016).

METHODOLOGY

Using an ethnographic methodology, in-depth interviews of professional women working in the construction industry were conducted, and a qualitative data gathering method was utilized. Professional women employees in specific construction companies were asked to participate, and referrals by women were also used to recruit participants. Consistent questions were posed to the research investigation participants through synchronous communications due to COVID-19 restrictions.

An ethnographic methodology allowed for an empirical approach for developing a deeper understanding of the experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of the interview subjects in construction (Pink et al. 2010). The first author has an academic and career background in the construction industry and understands construction procedures, unwritten rules, construction site environment, principles, and viewpoints of those working in the field (Kelly and Wilkinson 2018). The shared professional connection helped foster a sense of trust and empathy with the participants, which was critical for discussing the complex, often personal topics of the construction working environment (Fellows 2015; Phelps and Horman, 2010).

Qualitative data gathering provided an environment for asking exploratory questions designed to elicit insights into women's working lives and discerning pathways towards increased participation in the industry. The significance of using the participant's narrative account of their experiences lies in the ability to elucidate an accurate accounting of the complexities and challenges in performing their work (Lekshiri and Kamm 2020; Neale et al. 2000; Smith and Costello 2018). The findings from the interviews and narratives reinforced how qualitative research was appropriate for this study (Buse et al. 2013; Maxwell 2005).

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection and analysis were undertaken using the grounded theory framework procedure. Grounded theory data analysis uses an inductive reasoning approach towards generating theories and meanings of the developing patterns during the interview process (Dainty et al. 2000). A thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted to interpret patterns during and after the interview process. The patterns were analyzed, and data linkages were developed using axial coding methods. Axial coding was used to break down and identify the connections between the patterns which emerged from the data. The relationships determined the main themes of the coding results (Lekchiri and Kamm 2020; Maher et al. 2018).

Using the ethnographic research method, in-depth one-on-one personal interviews with 22 professional women currently working in the construction industry took place over nine months during 2020-2021. Synchronous communication methods were used to ensure privacy and safety during the 2020-2021 coronavirus pandemic study period, and the interviewer recorded all audio and video data from interviews. The interviewer transcribed the audio, and all references to companies, participants, or other individuals were removed to provide anonymity (Smith and

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Costello 2018). Consistent questions were posed to the participants based on the grounded theory framework to ensure validity and rigor, and invariant pattern analysis revealed the axial categories and subcategories (Dainty et al. 2000; Maher et al. 2018).

Sociodemographic information – 22 women participants. Sociodemographic information of the participants is as follows: all participants are women, and 19 out of 22 participants began their construction careers before college graduation, working as summer interns. All 22 participants had either attended college or completed college. Twenty out of 22 participants held engineering or construction management degrees, and six out of 22 participants earned master's degrees. In addition, six participants had advanced training such as LEED and OSHA certifications. All participants worked in the United States. Table 1 below lists the company (by number) position/title of the participant, and approximate years in construction, including internships.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Information

Company number	Position/Title at time of interview	Number of participants in position	Years in construction, including internships
1	Assistant superintendent	1	8
	Superintendent	1	10
	Engineer	1	5
	Assistant project manager	1	8
	Project manager	1	11
2	Project manager	1	25
3	Vice-president	1	24
	Director	1	18
	Assistant superintendent	1	4
	Senior project engineer	1	6
	Assistant project manager	1	7
4	Senior director	1	25
5	Estimator	1	14
6	Vice-president	1	23
	Project manager	2	8, 10
7	Vice-president	1	11
	Director	1	8
8	Vice-president	1	23
9	Construction projects administrator	1	27
10	Principal	1	28
11	Vice-president	1	29

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Despite amplified initiatives to increase women's participation in the construction industry, women continue to exit their professional positions (Francis 2017). The percentage of women in

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the industry has remained relatively stagnant at under 10% participation (National Association of Women in Construction 2019). The purpose of using a qualitative research method was to determine what interventions foster career engagement and increase retention of women in the construction industry. Four primary codes emerged as key impact outcomes for the persistence of women in the construction industry: harassment, leadership, mentorship, and zero-tolerance. The code, harassment, emerged as the primary barrier towards increased retention of women in this male-dominated industry and was broken down into five subcodes for further scrutiny. All primary and subcode data are supported by the participants’ quotes for further clarity (Lekchiri and Kamm 2020).

Harassment. For this study, the primary code, “harassment,” has been coded as; sexual, discriminatory (Lekchiri and Kamm 2020, p. 584), bullied, made to feel uncomfortable by a man, toxic atmosphere, dangerous, derogatory, isolated in a situation, scared, struggled, purposely and blatantly excluded, intimidated, abused, yelling, loudness, scared, and frightened. Harassment was consistently referred to by all participants, and subcodes developed within the data. Figure 1 below indicates the subcodes and number of participants experiencing harassment.

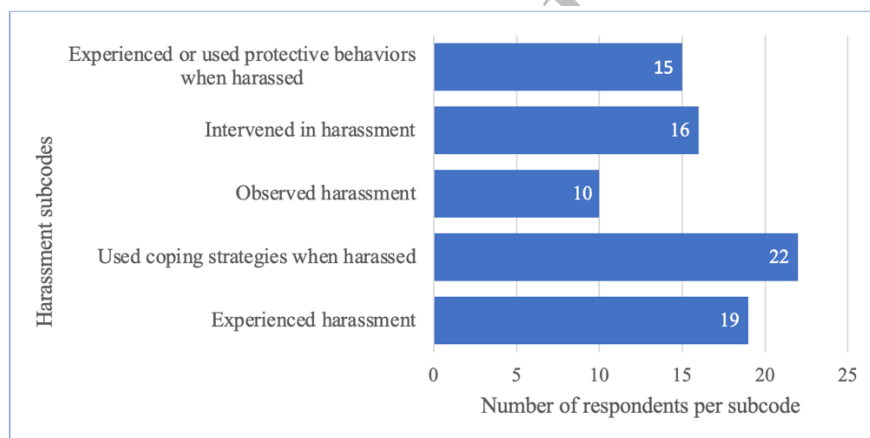


Figure 1. Harassment subcodes and number of respondents (22 participants).

A - Harassment (primary code) – 19 out of 22 participants. For many participants, the experiences of harassment were normalized on the construction job site, and the masculine culture they work in often included loud, angry, and aggressive exchanges. Women in this study mentioned aggressive situations created a threatening atmosphere, contributing to workplace anxiety (Fouad et al. 2016; Singh et al. 2018). Three participant quotes which support this critical finding include:

- “There was definitely harassment... there was one [incident]... And I never said anything... I just didn’t want to make waves, and I handled it. I [was] like, shut it down.”
- “I have to keep my cool even in frustrating situations. I’ve got a guy, [he’s] just straight up yelled profanities [in] my face, acting very violent.”

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- "[They say] derogatory kind[s] of things, [and] that's not... an isolated incident. It probably happens [a lot] because it's just become, you know, the norm."

B - Used coping strategies when harassed – 22 out of 22 participants. Women in this study overwhelmingly experienced and used coping strategies when faced with challenges to their authority, and many learned to deflect or "shut him down" (McLaughlin et al. 2012). Two participant quotes which support this finding include:

- "...that has always been part of it, that you have to cope. You dress differently. Maybe you make a joke when you've been harassed so that you can get past it, you know, that kind of thing. There're coping mechanisms."
- "...It's a targeted kind of thing sometimes... The [site manager], they... have authority, right... And he propositions her, and she's like, 'I don't believe this is happening.' And she's got to shut him down. But at the same time, [the guy]... has broken that wall of authority, which he would not have done if it was a guy. Right. So that's huge."

C - Observed harassing behavior – 10 out of 22 participants. Observing harassing or intimidating behavior can be distressing. Observing harassing behavior that includes yelling can often be confrontational towards both the observer and receiver. This type of behavior can serve as a bullying tactic. Two participant quotes which support this finding include:

- "A lot of yelling, bullying as harassment; [it] created [a] hostile working environment. [It was] jarring."
- "I don't understand...men just throwing a fit, yelling, throwing stuff... And everyone's like, 'oh yeah, he's had a little fit.' If I did that, I would be labeled [with] so many bad names for the rest of my career... not just one day."

D - Intervened in harassing behavior – 16 out of 22 participants. An intervention of harassing behavior includes those who have personally intervened in a harassing situation or protected someone harassed. Interventions can consist of witnessing and helping those being harassed, disrespected, or experiencing discriminatory behaviors, and stopping the harassing situation. One participant quote which supports this finding includes:

- "[I'm] like, grabbing my phone and [say], I have a problem with this. Can you help me? I feel like one hundred percent I can do that. It's just extremely open and... supportive."

E - Experienced harassment or used the protective measures of fellow employees to stop harassment – 15 out of 22 participants. Those who have experienced workplace harassment may have halted the harassing behavior through a "protector" such as another employee or superior using their authority to stop the behavior. Protective and preventive measures serve as a safeguard for women (Wright 2016). Two participant quotes which support this finding include:

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- “There are male workers who are very protective... [and I felt] I could just do my job. And if there were idiots on the [job]site, the [men on site] would usually kind of pick up on the fact... [and] watch out for you... it’s knowing that the company has your back.”
- “... [women tradespeople] are seeing the superintendent, the leader of the project, tell everyone in the room, including the men, that we have a zero-tolerance. I think that helps [women]... get relief of like, ‘OK, this is going to be a good job site for me to be on.’”

FURTHER THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS.

Figure 2 summarizes the thematic analysis and findings for leadership and mentorship for contextual influence.

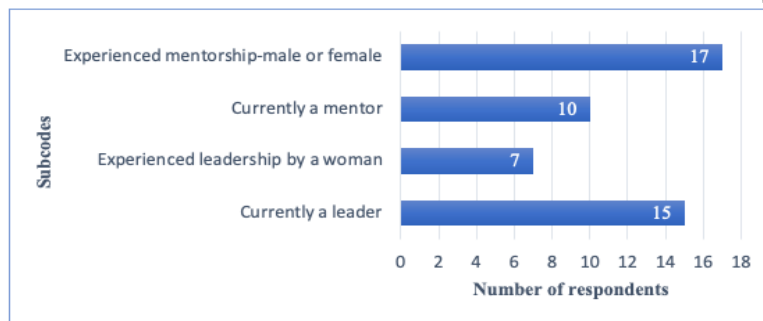


Figure 2. Leadership and mentorship (22 participants).

Leadership influence – 15 out of 22 participants are currently in a leadership role. As defined for this research investigation, a leader influences, manages, or leads a group or person in a company. Participants with greater leadership and management experience were often directly involved in the careers of their less experienced direct reports, providing career guidance and mentorship. Participants frequently cited these women leaders as their inspiration to stay in the industry (Brue 2018; Singh et al. 2013). The data also suggests women in leadership positions exhibit higher self-efficacy, a critical factor towards increased intentions to continue working in construction (Singh et al. 2013).

Mentor influence – 17 out of 22 participants had a mentor. Many women interviewed for this study were mentored, both formally and informally. Mentorship is frequently mentioned in scholarly publications as both a career success strategy and employee retention method (Morello 2018, Singh et al. 2009). Most women participants with less than seven years’ experience had women as mentors; women with greater than seven years’ experience have had both genders as mentors.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, including onboarding programs in larger companies, serve to provide mentorship opportunities. Other mentorship programs include increased competencies in hands-on skills. Women managers in smaller companies took the initiative and provided mentorship to newer women recruits.

Zero tolerance policies have operated at the building trades level. Curbing harassing behaviors using zero-tolerance policies in the construction industry is an underexplored research topic.

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Scholarly research on zero-tolerance harassment policies is available for several other male-dominated industries, and employee confidence in zero-tolerance policy interventions may aid women's employment retention (Gruber 1998). Intolerance of harassment and zero-tolerance policies are currently used by some construction companies. A participant quote which supports this finding includes:

"[Company] takes a very harsh standpoint on [harassment]. For example, ...we had a craft employee. Other male craft employees overheard him saying he was going to [harass] one of the female employees. Another craft worker... just dropped what he was doing and came into our office. And ten minutes later, that guy was off our job site. It's a very quick, [serious] response when we do have issues, and they come from zero tolerance. I think that is needed in this industry."

CONCLUSION

Harassment and other workplace barriers have been cited as a motivation for women leaving their engineering and professional construction careers. As indicated from the literature and the data presented here, harassment continues to be a career interrupter for women in construction occupations. Male-dominated workplace cultures could diligently examine their organizational efforts and the influences which provide supportive structures for women's career attainment. Key findings from this research indicate leadership, particularly robust, active, and authoritative female leadership, can serve as an interrupter towards women leaving their construction careers. Leadership initiatives, including increased female managers and mentors at all career levels, should be further investigated to determine the efficacy for current and future women in construction careers. As indicated by other studies cited, mentorships are essential for forming supportive organizational structures for less experienced or vulnerable women and may be a crucial interventional mechanism towards greater retention of women in the industry. This research investigation found many women in leadership positions who had previously experienced harassment had male interventionists, and those women are now serving as interventionists for younger women in their companies.

Harassment is considered an issue of power, and this research investigation contributed to the body of knowledge by learning how women in leadership positions were serving as the trusted person to stop harassing behavior towards women due to their authoritative position. A key finding is how all 22 women participants in this research investigation found it necessary to employ coping mechanisms to ward off harassing and intimidating behaviors, suggesting further research to increase women's participation is warranted. This finding suggests further interventions to increase women's participation are warranted. Zero tolerance policies on jobsites as a harassment deterrent should be further investigated, particularly from a construction site security and employee well-being perspective. Forming multiple supportive organizational structures for women within the construction workplace culture and zero-tolerance guidelines for behavior may foster future increased participation.

Results from this research suggest that women in leadership positions who previously experienced harassment had male interventionists and are now serving as the primary interventionists for younger women in their companies. This research investigation's results

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contribute to the body of knowledge by suggesting how women's participation may be increased from forming multiple supportive organizational structures within the construction workplace culture, including enacting zero-tolerance guidelines to curb inappropriate or harassing behavior. Limitations of this research investigation include the number of women interviewed qualitatively. Quantitative research investigations can be undertaken in future work based on the extensive data collected, as the research findings underscore the need for further exploration of novel interventional mechanisms towards greater retention of women in the industry.

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