



CHANGING THE WAY WE
THINK ABOUT WOMEN IN
CONSTRUCTION

THE ECONOMIC CASE
FOR DIVERSITY

DLPA

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SUMMARY

WOMEN REPRESENT JUST 11% OF THE WORKFORCE IN THE CONSTRUCTION SECTOR. AN INDUSTRY WITH A GROUP SO UNDER-REPRESENTED CANNOT BE OPERATING AT ITS BEST. THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION NEED TO BE BETTER UNDERSTOOD, AND MEANINGFUL SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED IN A COORDINATED WAY ACROSS THE SECTOR.

CRITICALLY WE RECOMMEND:

1. START WITH A TICK OF THE BOX

Mandatory compliance is a valid starting point, provided it is properly administered.

2. BEYOND THE TICK OF A BOX

Once mandatory compliance generates momentum, the real benefits of diversity will be realised.

3. STAYING COMPETITIVE BY CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Diversity helps business stay competitive by challenging the way things have always been done.

4. THE INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE IS RESPONSIBLE

The change cannot be the responsibility of a single group – that's not women, or men, employers or unions. We must all take responsibility for the change together.

5. IT'S NOT ABOUT GENDER

The answer to the problem of raising participation of women in construction is not to frame everything in terms of gender. Constantly pointing to gender and difference causes an us and them mentality.

6. MOVING PAST BIAS

Bias must be identified and systemically suspended in order to ensure full participation in the sector, and survival of the industry.

CONSTRUCTION IS A UNIQUE INDUSTRY, WHICH ATTRACTS MANY, DUE TO THE MIX OF PRACTICAL AND CREATIVE ACTIVITIES, THE OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A LEGACY ENJOYED BY MANY AND WORKING TOGETHER WITH A VARIETY OF THINKING STYLES. HOWEVER THE NATURE OF THE WORK IS ALSO HIGH STAKES AND TIME PRESSURED. THE ENVIRONMENT IS ROBUST AND IN ADDITION TO ADDRESSING THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION, WE ALSO NEED TO BE WORKING TOGETHER TO FIND WAYS TO KEEP PEOPLE IN THE INDUSTRY.

THE CHALLENGE

The Construction Industry is the fourth largest contributor to Australia's GDP. It is also used as a key economic indicator – being one of the first industries to show the stress signals of boom or bust. The costs of the sector influence how much our groceries cost, how quickly our wages grow, and how much our houses are worth and cost. This is an industry of absolute criticality to the nation.

And yet, the industry has long struggled with maximising productivity (for clarity productivity refers to the efficiency with which jobs are built, not the effort of individuals). The reasons for this struggle are many – ranging from rising costs to changing technology to lumpy government investment and even global economic factors. One contributing factor which is often pointed too, and less often engaged with, is the lack of meaningful, diverse participation in the industry.

According to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) women account for just 11% of the total construction workforce in Australia. This is a tiny portion of the workforce, and points to a possible problem in the industry. If nothing else, a workforce with such under-representation from approximately half the population cannot possibly be operating at the height of productivity. This means construction around the country takes longer and costs more than it would if the industry were more productive or efficient. This affects every single Australian, and it is in everyone's best interest to see improvement

However, this problem has been grappled with for many, many years now – without meaningful improvement in the figures. This is a challenge without an easy or quick fix. In order to progress this issue, we need to think differently about women in construction, and what needs to change to increase participation.

THE SOLUTION

1. IT'S OK TO START BY TICKING A BOX

I confess that I was once a staunch critic of mandatory quotas – believing that the administration of a true merit-based system would correct the problem. Having seen the problem only worsen in a lot of ways over the last 15 years, I have converted – with a few provisos.

Diversity as a 'tick a box' exercise is in and of itself not a bad thing. It is how this is approached which can be a problem. Having seen the administration of other mandatory participation schemes – particularly in relation to Aboriginal Participation – I believe a system which simply mandates the number of a people fulfilling certain demographic data who are to be utilised on a project does not work. For example, in the Aboriginal Participation schemes often utilised the system results in people of Aboriginal heritage being hired for jobs that either don't exist or they aren't qualified for. No support is provided. The reasons for low participation are not explored, and customised solutions not formed. Not surprisingly, these schemes do not appear to meaningfully change the industry – they only add another layer of cost to projects.


That said, as a first step to bring the problem into the awareness of employers and employees alike, mandating participation rates on projects can be a positive initiative for quick improvement.

2. BEYOND THE TICK OF A BOX

Once we move past simply ticking the box we will start to gain momentum for more meaningful and sustainable change. As we see increased participation, we would expect to see diminished barriers to participation. This is where the economic case for diversity starts to make the most sense, and have the highest yield. Those already on the path to a more inclusive and diverse workforce will be best positioned to capitalise as the industry moves into this phase. Women included and welcomed in the construction industry and higher levels of participation will create more innovative, productive workplaces – and a more sustainable industry overall.

3. STAYING COMPETITIVE & CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

As market conditions tighten, diversity becomes more critical to the survival of businesses – and the construction industry is not immune. Increasingly businesses must continually challenge the way they do things to become more and more efficient over time. Through avoiding homogenous workforces, and encouraging people of different backgrounds and viewpoints into the workforce, the established way of doing things is more likely to be challenged. This creates a culture of innovation, and assists businesses to stay competitive.



NEVER DOUBT THAT A
SMALL GROUP OF THOUGHTFUL,
COMMITTED CITIZENS
CAN CHANGE THE WORLD;
INDEED, IT'S THE ONLY THING
THAT EVER HAS.

MARGARET MEAD

4. WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE FOR CHANGE

The responsibility for the change and increased participation must be borne by the industry as a whole. So often the challenge of female participation in construction is presented as the responsibility of women to solve. Attributing responsibility in this way only serves to further embed the prejudice. The industry as a whole stands to benefit, and the industry as a whole must collaborate on the solution.

6. MOVING PAST BIAS

There is undoubtedly bias within the industry. All parties have views about the roles women are likely to perform in the industry. Women are also much more likely to be stereotyped on the basis of personality attributes they exhibit. This bias must be suspended in order to move forward. All participants in the industry must have an open mind about the role women might play, and indeed how the sector as whole might look into the future. The world is rapidly changing, and it is our biases which make us so swiftly irrelevant.

5. IT'S NOT ACTUALLY ABOUT GENDER THAT'S THE POINT

The danger of women in construction initiatives is that everything is defined in terms of male and female, us and them, sameness and difference. It is in framing the issue in these terms that we perpetuate the prejudice. We advocate approaching the issue from the stance that merit is distributed evenly between the sexes, and as such you would expect to see equal participation – or least something much closer to equal than 11%. So fundamentally something is going awry in the process or the industry which is preventing participation. We seek to identify the levers and bring about meaningful change, not create a platform for further prejudice and bias.

WHAT NEXT?

The first thing to do is to start the conversation within your organisation. Get the statistics and understand how you fare with diversity. Get feedback from your teams about how they think you can attract more women; what are you doing well in this area, what isn't working. Educate your workforce about bias and challenge status quo. Create a working group and compile a pulse report to present to your executive team and your board. Review your professional development strategy and identify any gaps that may impact how you attract and retain women. Most importantly, communicate with your workforce that this is something that for you as an organisation, extends way beyond tick in the box.

ABOUT KARLIE



Karlie has worked extensively with businesses large and small to formulate and implement strategy, and equip leaders with the ability to lead effectively for 15 years. Karlie has assisted businesses in re-designing processes and procedures, implementing best practice and re-designing entire business models.

Karlie works with clients to maximise the efficiency of their organisations and equip their people to thrive in a lean environment.

With a focus on business sustainability and profitability, Karlie recognises that people integrated with a supportive work culture are key drivers of profitability and performance. This perspective motivates Karlie to work with the people in organisations, providing them with the hard and soft business skills to execute business strategy and deliver outcomes.

Karlie has predominantly worked in the construction sector, as well as a suite of other industries from finance to car rental. Through her efforts as a consultant, Karlie has supported businesses as they have gone from \$10 million turnover to \$50 million. Karlie's academic qualifications have groundings in commerce, law with a focus on employment law, and business administration, giving her a wellrounded perception of the key factors driving business performance in current markets. Karlie has worked extensively with organisations large and small through survey formulation and deployment, data analysis and the engagement of the workforce in the results and subsequent change initiatives.



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