

## AN OVERVIEW OF CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PRACTICE OF BUILDING PROFESSION IN NIGERIA

By

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### Abstract

The building sector of the construction industry has low women participation, both in the practice and academia. The women professionals represent a huge untapped resource for an industry begging for skilled labour and talented professionals. This paper reviewed the barriers contributing to the low participation of women in the practicing of building profession of the construction industry in Nigeria. Structured questionnaire on factors contributing to low participation of women in the practice of building profession, and motivational factors for increasing women participation in building practice in Nigeria were administered to fifty (50) women degree holders. It was discovered that women participation in the building industry in Nigeria is hampered by inadequate job security in the private sector, work stress and fatigue, inadequate pay, responsibility to family, socio-cultural and religious segregation, unsecured working environment, inflexible working hours and inadequate contact with other women professionals. Furthermore, the paper highlights suggestions to create a better path for women participation and retention in this male-dominated zone by encouraging more females to train and aspire for career in building, clearer equal opportunities at the workplace and stronger roles of the social partners. Finally, the professional body should continue its current drive, supporting the female professionals.

**Keywords:** *Construction Industry, Built Environment, Women Builders, Female Professionals.*

### Introduction

The building industry is typically a male dominated industry and presents a major challenge for equal opportunities for women. The building sector of the construction industry has a particularly low participation rate for women, both in the industry and academia. Clarke *et al.* (2005) opined that the prevalent social conditions underpins the occupational segregation of the labour market into masculine and feminine jobs, is as imperforated today as it was at the beginning of the century, with construction as the prime example. The majority of women working in the building industry undertake administrative, technical and professional work while the intake at the operative level is very low and the data are scarce to non-existence, but in most countries these represent less than 1% of the workforce. Inevitably, it can be concluded that building industry is male-dominated.

Agapiou (2002) carried out a research on the reasons why female workers shy away from the building industry as a whole and the craft sector in particular. The author found out that among the common barriers are social acceptances of employment, sexually-inappropriate occupation, sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, physical incapability, unqualified for blue-collar jobs and labour conditions such as extreme weather, unsociable work-hours and exposure to hazards. Contrarily, there have been few studies focusing on factors influencing women entry into construction and what their expectations are (Bennett *et al.*, 1999; Clarke *et al.*, 1999). One study showed that many students choose the path without full knowledge about the industry and its culture. Evidently, career choices of young people are influenced by many factors from events in early childhood to parents, peers and career advisers. A few had friends that helped them to make the career decisions while others were influenced by family or friends already in the industry. Similarly, Aulin and Jingmond, (2011) carried out a research and found out that the construction industry is still regarded largely as a male-dominated field, and entering this industry is a challenge for most women. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, only 8.2% of those employed as construction managers are women, and 3.1% employed as construction laborers are women. The majority of women working in the construction industry perform administrative work, while the tasks at the operative level are largely performed by men. However, this does not dismiss the fact that there are women who are actively employed in all aspects of the industry. Even with an increased participation of women in this field, the general perception is that women veer towards other more traditionally female roles (Aulin and Jingmond, 2011).

The Building Profession offers a wide range of jobs and career paths for both women and men, although traditionally it has been a male domain. Jobs are available in all areas of the profession from trades, consultancy services, project management, teaching/lecturing and a host of other practices (Izam, 2010). The Building Profession is designed for men and women alike; each possessing relative strength and mental capacity with enthusiasm in their chosen area of expertise to execute a given task under the same umbrella. It is worth noting in Nigeria that women earn more in construction work than in other jobs traditionally considered their domain (Adeyemi *et al.*, 2006). In most states of the federation, especially the Northern states, distortions and discrimination in the labour market restrict women's option for field work. Consequently, female representation in senior positions of practice remains low (Babatunde, *et al.*, 2012). A typical Nigerian woman is often seen executing difficult tasks like farming, grinding and other like activities on behalf of their male counterparts. If such degree of strength exists in women, why are the literate Female Builders shunning the practice of their profession? According to Anatonopoulos *et al.* (2011), there is a need to assess the specific constraints preventing them from developing their full professional potential, and possible policies to overcome these obstacles. Implementing policies that remove labour market distortions and create a level playing field for all will give female graduates the opportunity to develop their potential and to participate in economic life more visibly.

The paper reviews and discusses barriers responsible for the low participation of women in the practice of building as a profession. Additionally, the paper will also proffer suggestions to encourage the female gender into building practices in the construction industry.

### **The Professional Builder**

Izam, 2010 defines a Professional Builder as a person who has received an approved standard of training and practice in Building, and found competent, after due examinations, to be registered by Council of Registered Builders of Nigeria (CORBON). The discipline of Building deals with the professional content and training to become a Builder. A Professional Builder receives both formal and informal training with Continuous Professional Development (CPD) through workshops and seminars as a major requirement. According to Kawu (2013), the professional woman builder must always bear in mind that to excel in her responsibilities of building production management and maintenance, she must know how to prepare these documents; Construction Methodology Programme, Project Management Programme, Project Health and Safety, Building Survey Document, Construction Budget Plan, Project Monitoring/Evaluation, Construction Documents.

### **The Need for Women in the Profession**

Adeyemi *et al.* (2006) assert that in Nigeria, female resource represents about half of human resources and for optimal utilization of human resources, it is considered that women should be adequately represented in the construction industry, which is the prime motivator of the country's economy. According to Fisher (2007), recently more than ever, the construction industry offers women tremendous opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship and financial security, but female professionals represent a huge untapped resource for an industry begging for skilled labour and talented professionals.

The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC, 2005) observed that under-representation of women in sectors experiencing skills shortages is exacerbating these shortages. The EOC says breaking gender barriers will help solve skill shortages. According to Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB, 2006), the construction industry is facing a 'demographic time-bomb' that is, the pool of traditional male applicants is contracting and the current workforce is ageing leading to problems of skill shortage and recruitment. Therefore, there is a need to tap the talents of the 'other half' of the workforce, that is, the female professionals. Females and males appear to possess equal potential to develop the skills required for the pursuit of science; it is both a waste of talent and a deprivation to individuals that the two sexes do not participate equally in science (Uchenna, 2012). Bouville (2008) argued that women would benefit from graduating in a scientific discipline, due to higher salaries and the possibility to help others. Having more female engineers would also be beneficial to the economy because of the increasing need for engineers and of the positive impact of diversity on designs. There is ample evidence that when women are able to develop their full labour market potential, there can be significant macroeconomic gains (Loko *et al.*, 2009; Dollar *et al.*, 2009). GDP per capita losses attributable to gender gaps in the labour market have been estimated at up to 27 percent in certain regions (Cuberes *et al.*, 2012). Based on International Labour Organization data, Aguirre *et al.* (2012) estimated that of the 865 million women worldwide who have the potential to contribute more fully to their national economies, 812 million live in emerging and developing nations, including Nigeria.

In rapidly aging economies, higher female labour force contribution can boost growth by mitigating the impact of a shrinking workforce. For example, in Japan, the annual potential growth rate could

rise by about ¼ percentage point if the female labour participation rate were to reach the average for the G7 countries, resulting in a permanent rise in per capita GDP of 4 percent, compared to the baseline scenario (IMF, 2012c). Higher female work force participation would also result in a more skilled labour force, in view of women's higher education levels (Steinberg *et al.*, 2012). Better opportunities for women to earn and control income could contribute to broader economic development in developing economies like Nigeria, for instance through higher levels of school enrolment for girls. Women are more likely than men to invest a large proportion of their household income in the education of their children. According to the ILO, women's work, both paid and unpaid, may be the single most important poverty-reducing factor in developing economies (Heintz, 2006). Accordingly, higher female labour force participation and greater earnings by women could result in higher expenditure on school enrolment for children, including girls, potentially triggering a vicious cycle, when educated women become female role models (Aguirre *et al.*, 2012; Miller, 2008). Stotsky (2006) posits that women's relative lack of opportunities in developing countries inhibits economic growth, while at the same time, economic growth leads to improvements in their disadvantaged conditions.

The employment of women on an equal basis would allow companies to make better use of the available talent pool, with potential growth implications (Barsh, *et al.*, 2012; CAHRS, 2011). While not uncontroversial, there is evidence of a positive impact of women's presence on boards and in senior management on companies' performance. Companies employing female managers could be better positioned to serve consumer markets dominated by women (CED, 2012; CAHRS, 2011) and more gender-diverse boards could enhance corporate governance by offering a wider range of perspectives (OECD, 2012; Lord Davies, 2013).

### **Factors Preventing Women Participation in the Construction Industry**

It is adequate to argue that the under-representation of women in technology generally, and in the wide field of Building technology in particular, has been given deserved attention. As a result of this worldwide attention, varied efforts have been made to find solutions to the inadequate number of women in the field. Giving impetus to these efforts was the placing of increased importance on science and technology for national economic development. Also important was the influence of the growing commitment to equality of men and women. Several causes had been identified for women's low participation in science and technology. Harding (2007) highlighted the following factors are embedded in the political and cultural context of society and classified the factors into three:

1. The assumptions that society makes about males and females (their abilities, behaviors, roles, and aspirations);
2. The objectives and organization of education;
3. The practice of science, technology and mathematics.

Harding highlighted the study by (Maccoby *et al.*, 2005), which concluded that males display superior spatial skills (with the sex differential increasing with age of sample) and females show greater verbal skills (with the sex differential increasing with age). Further analysis of the studies earlier reviewed by Maccoby and Jacklin showed, however, that in none did the sex of the person

contribute more than four percent to the total variance within the sample (Harding, 2007). As Harding puts it, there is much more variation in spatial abilities within one sex than between the sexes. Despite these findings, however, there persists a school of thought that are firmly based on “perceived” biological sex differences, genetically pre-programmed, that promote boys’ effectiveness in technology than girls.

### **Influence of Education on Female Technological Participation**

Blackstone *et al.* (2000) briefly reviewed the influence of education on female technological participation and found that girls tend to set their sights lower, take easier courses in further education, take fewer A-levels for higher education and thus are less likely to go on to higher education. They also found that females attribute their success to luck and external factors and attribute their failure to lack of ability. Males on the other hand, tend to be opposite, claiming successes for themselves. Newton (2001) reported that girls were found considerably behind boys in having experience in physics and crafts and technical subjects (which are prerequisite areas important for gaining entry into technological studies). The reasons found for girls under-participation in physics, wood work, metal work and technical drawing included their being prevented from taking the courses, lack of or shortage of facilities and staff, social pressure and absence of traditional career guidance. Newton also found that girls reported that they were not exposed to technological careers until it was too late for them to choose the appropriate subjects necessary for technological studies.

Stan (2002) noted that in the United States, research indicated that girls have poor attitude towards technology, thereby enrolling less often in it while also demonstrating lower achievement levels in the subject. Stan thus highlighted the view of Skolnick *et al.* (2002) that since poor attitudes relate directly to lower achievement levels and to lower enrolment in science courses, negative attitudes must be ameliorated in girls and women in science and technology.

### **Masculinity and Feminization of the Built Environment**

A cursory glance at the different construction fields all over the world and in Nigeria particularly reveal that the fields are dominated by men and the profession regarded as a male domain. As Walton (2006) reported, societies do not expect women to engage in crafts and those that do are seen to step “out of line”. As a response to this restriction, women are under-represented in the fields and over-represented in what can be termed the service-sector. The jobs include teaching, nursing, sales and advertising. The explanations given for this dominance by men have been speculative. As Breakwell (2000) explained, there are undoubtedly overt institutional and organizational barriers which function to restrain access or involvement of women. Nivea *et al.* (2001) presented models explaining women’s lower status in organizations. The structural-institutional model highlighted the positive impact of role models and company policies on careers of women. Another model proposes that there are biological sex differences, genetically pre-programmed which promote males’ effectiveness in technology. Newton (2001) wrote on the traditional image of technology as being heavy, dirty and masculine, while a woman who would succeed in the field had to be tough, aggressive and masculine. If she does not possess these

characteristics, then she must work in menial jobs requiring manual dexterity and “nimble fingers”. Nivea *et al.* (2001) identified this as the sex role model.

The masculinity surrounding the image of technology over the years remained very powerful and in turn reinforced the belief that the field is unsuitable for none other than men. Thus, women until recently formed a small percentage of total enrolments in university technology departments all over the world. Linden *et al.* (2005) and Sheridan (2004) affirmed that in the United States, the number of women who matriculate into and graduate from technology faculties have increased over the past decade, while women form about 20 percent of beginning technology students. They opined that there had also been changes in attitudes towards the roles of women and the probable changes in women’s own perception of their capabilities. It must be observed rather enthusiastically that though there are increases in women enrolment, still much is needed to improve the lot of women.

Several developments have brought about this shift in the traditional view of science and technology as perceived by men and women. As highlighted by Newton (2006), less emphasis is now placed on the “older heavy type of technology”, while talk is more and more about computers, printed circuit boards and electronics. Furthermore, the roles of women and men have been changing, with women’s liberation and empowerment, movements and changes in economic conditions altering the division of labour and raising questions otherwise left unasked in the past. Particularly, concern has been intense about increases in the number of women in technology and how their access to the fields will be made easier. In Europe the barriers most frequently experienced by women in all fields of technology can be assigned into 4 groups according to their origin (De Bruin, 2006):

1. Overt discrimination: It is openly stated in a job description that a firm will employ a male.
2. Hidden barriers: These barriers are often based on the assumptions of others or of the women themselves from childhood or from the culture they were raised in.
3. Actual differences between men and women that cause extra difficulties in a man-made organization culture. These can include differences in strength and emotional empathy.
4. The double task at work and at home for women

It is responsibility of women to ensure that family life at home is their first priority. In all industries of science and technology, obstacles for women engaging in and pursuing careers could be summarized as being due to the factors of traditions and cultural norms, attitudes and prejudices, religion, poverty and ignorance (Nzewi, 2006).

A sample survey of 50 women who had first or second degree in building as indicated in figure 1 and table 1, shows that inadequate contact with women professionals who have carved a niche in the profession to mentoring the young and upcoming women contributes to the low level of participation of women in the practice of the profession. It is then followed by women responsibilities to their families; as women are known to be home keepers. They prefer salary-based jobs where their income would be sustained in good working environment.



Table 1: Factors Contributing to Low Participation of Women in Building Profession

| S/N | Barriers factors  | Challenging<br>(1) | Very<br>Challenging<br>(2) | Most<br>Challenging<br>(3) | Total | Relative<br>Significance<br>Index<br>(RSI) | Rating |
|-----|---|--------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------|--|--------|
| 1   | Inadequate job security in the private sector in contrast to Government job | 5                  | 7                          | 38                         | 50    | 2.66                                       | 3      |
| 2   | Work stress/fatigue   | 7                  | 8                          | 35                         | 50    | 2.56                                       | 6      |
| 3   | Inadequate pay  | 25                 | 20                         | 5                          | 50    | 1.60                                       | 8      |
| 4   | Responsibility to Family  | 4                  | 8                          | 38                         | 50    | 2.68                                       | 2      |
| 5   | Socio-cultural/religious segregation  | 21                 | 19                         | 10                         | 50    | 1.78                                       | 7      |
| 6   | Unsecured working environment   | 5                  | 11                         | 34                         | 50    | 2.58                                       | 5      |
| 7   | Inflexible working hours  | 6                  | 8                          | 36                         | 50    | 2.60                                       | 4      |
| 8   | Inadequate contact with women professionals (mentoring)                     | 2                  | 9                          | 39                         | 50    | 2.74                                       | 1      |

Field Work (2014)

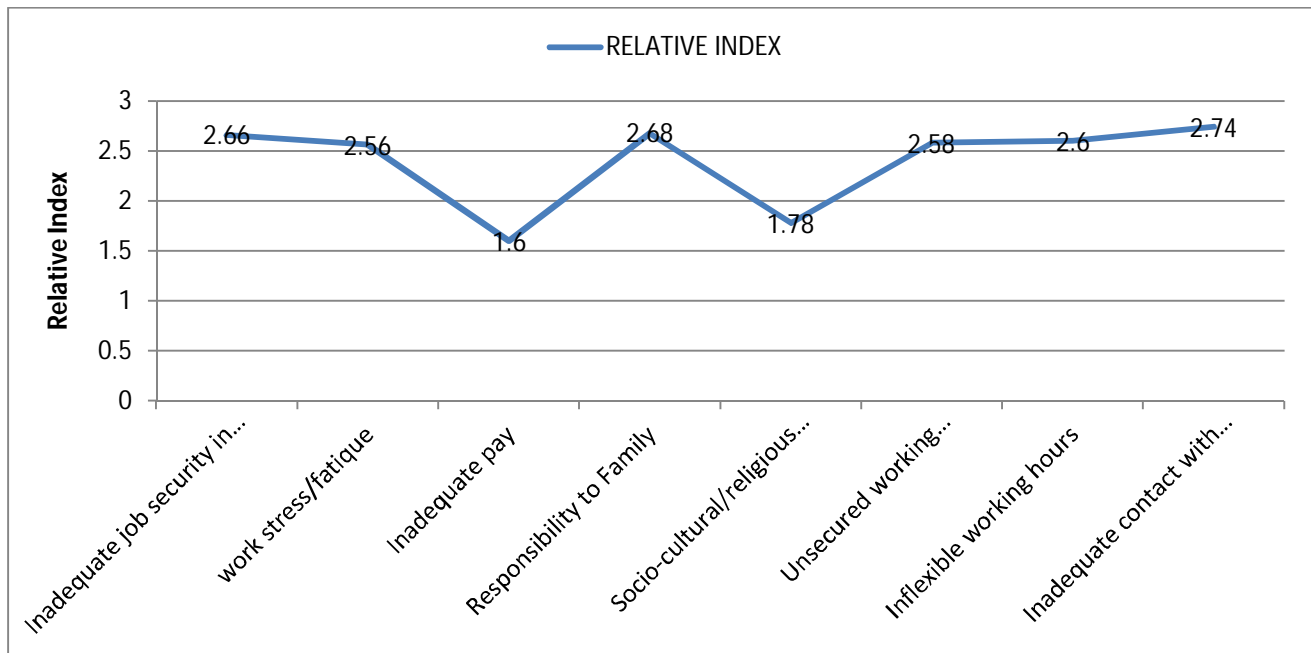


Figure 1: Factors Contributing to Low Women Participation in Building Practices Field Work (2014)

Patronizing women Practicing Builders through contract awards as contractors or consultants is the number one way to encourage the female gender into building practices in the construction industry, as it is indicated in figure 2 and table 2.

Table 2: Motivational Factors Relative Index for Increasing Women Participation in Building Practice in Nigeria

| S/N | Motivational Factors   | Effective<br>(1) | Very Effective<br>(2) | Most Effective<br>(3) | Total | Relative Significance Index | Rating |
|-----|--|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------|-----------------------------|--------|
| 1   | Employment of more women builders in Ministries and Parastatals related to Building, Land, Housing and Physical Infrastructure | 13               | 15                    | 22                    | 50    | 2.18                        | 4      |
| 2   | Patronizing women Practicing Builders through contract awards as contractors or consultants                                    | 7                | 9                     | 34                    | 50    | 2.54                        | 1      |
| 3   | Encouraging women into taking up lecturing, teaching and research in higher institutions                                       | 6                | 15                    | 29                    | 50    | 2.46                        | 3      |
| 4   | Postgraduate scholarships to women Building Graduates  | 3                | 20                    | 27                    | 50    | 2.48                        | 2      |

Field Work (2014)



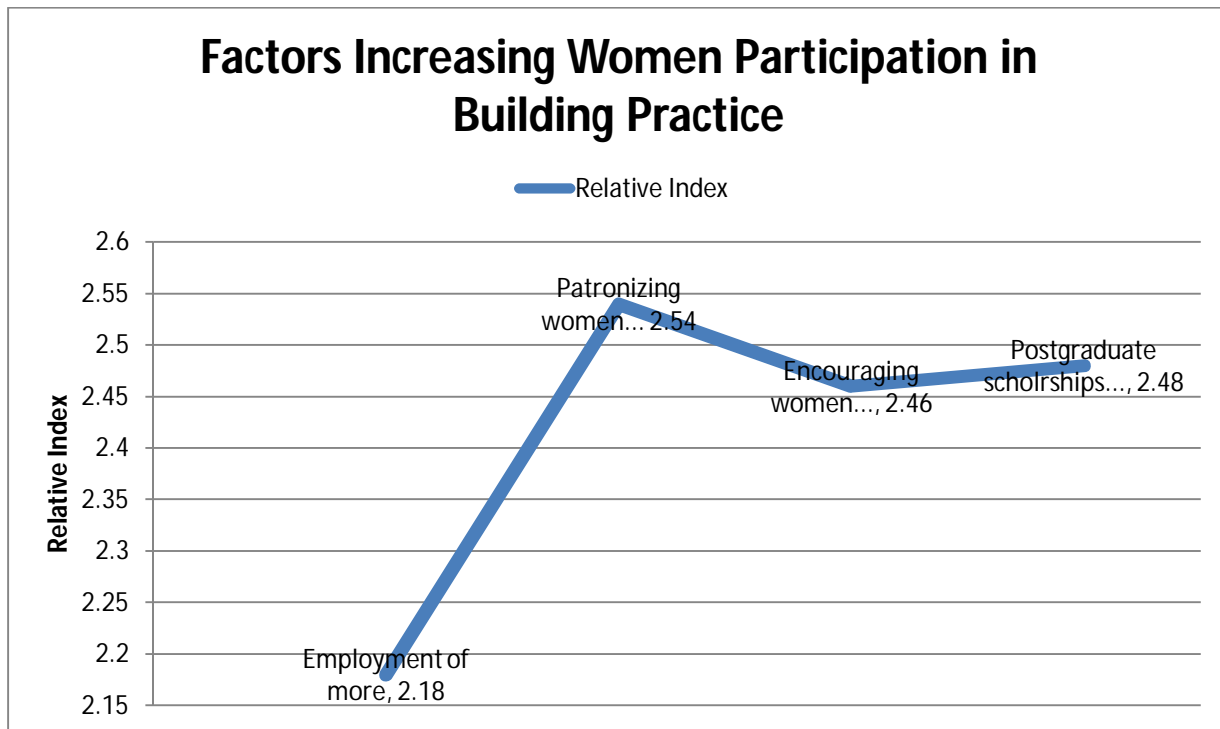


Figure 2: Motivational Factors for Increasing Women Participation in Building Practice in Nigeria

Field Work (2014)

This will afford more opportunities for the effective mentoring of young female graduates to practice the building profession. Offering Postgraduate scholarships to women building graduates comes second in encouraging the female gender into building practices in the construction industry. It is then followed by encouraging women into taking up lecturing, teaching and research in higher institutions, and employment of more women builders in Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) related to building, land, housing and physical infrastructure.

### Conclusion

Women participation in the building industry in Nigeria is hampered by the following factors: inadequate job security in the private sector; work stress and fatigue; inadequate pay, responsibility to family, socio-cultural and religious segregation, unsecured working environment due to the isolated nature of most construction sites, inflexible working hours and inadequate contact with women professionals. Employment of more women builders in Ministries, Departments and Agencies related to building, land, housing and physical infrastructure patronizing women in practice through contract awards as contractors or consultants and also encouraging them into teaching and research in higher institutions.

## Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the following are recommended:

- Avenues should be created by the professional and regulatory body for experienced women professionals in the industry to mentor the younger female graduates.
- Employment of more women builders in Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDA's)
- There should be patronage of women practicing builders through contract awards as contractors or consultants by government;
- Women should be encouraged in the academia.
- Postgraduate scholarships scheme should be made available to women building graduates for the furtherance of their education.

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