



Where are all the women? Why 99% of construction site workers are male

We must challenge the stereotype of a builder as a man and help women thrive in careers in construction

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Tuesday 19 May 2015 06.45 BST

When Philippa Tuttiett started helping her dad on building sites at the age of 10, it could have been an obvious beginning to a career in construction. But it wasn't until years later, after encouragement from her university lecturer, that she realised it could be a genuine career move for a woman.

"Building was in the family," she says. "My father and grandfather were both builders, so it was in the blood. But like most girls, I never ever thought about it as a career option."

"When I was a kid, I asked my dad for pocket money and he said I had to work to earn it. I was lucky that he was quite forward-thinking and saw me as another worker - he knew I could muck in. I kept coming back to earn more and I started learning more about it. By the time I went to university, I was studying for what I thought would be the qualification to make my career out of. But actually, I was already a multi-skilled builder; I was already doing my career."

Gender diversity in the construction industry is shockingly poor. Women make up just 11% of the entire workforce, but even this figure includes many who work behind a desk, often in design, management or secretarial roles. On building sites themselves, it is estimated that 99%

of workers are men. The UK has the lowest proportion of female engineers in Europe and only 14% of entrants to engineering and technology first degree courses are women.

Holly Porter, who runs a networking group for female construction workers, Chicks With Bricks, explains: “The industry has been pretty stagnant in terms of ratios of women to men for quite a long time. There are certain areas where things are a lot better, like the design industry. But if you look at manual careers the proportion of women is absolutely minimal.”

Part of the problem is sexism; research shows that more than half of female construction workers said they were treated worse than men because of their gender. But Porter says there is a wider challenge to encourage young people not to see it as a male-only career.

“I think a lot of it is about perception,” she says. “The reason I set up Chicks With Bricks was because you just couldn’t find any female role models; they weren’t publicised. There was an element of: ‘if you’re a woman in construction, you keep your head down, don’t talk about it and pretend you’re a bloke’.”

In Tuttielt’s case, she faces stereotypes all the time. “People are constantly surprised at my job. It amazes me. We had Margaret Thatcher running our country, yet I tell people I’m a builder and they’re gobsmacked.”

She adds: “I don’t mind it - it’s actually quite a nice thing because people are normally happily surprised. And unless people get more exposure to women in the industry things won’t change.”

For Alethea Watson the key to improving gender diversity in the construction industry is to make it a more appealing career option for youngsters. Watson is a mentor on a scheme called Volunteer It Yourself (VIY), which combines volunteering and DIY by helping young people learn building skills while working on community construction projects. She says she got involved partly to act as a role model for young women wanting to go into the building industry.

“A lot of young people we work with are unsure what to do with their careers and some are in trouble with social issues and things like that. So this project is for them to test the waters, give it a go and see what it’s like.

“For instance, on the first project I did there was a young girl there who we introduced to bricklaying and she realised she really liked it. She was quite a strong character anyway, and I think this gave her some hope about her future. She’s now got skills that she’s gained that she can put to use in her career.”

So far, some 38% of those who have signed up for the VIY scheme have been female, according to its sponsors Wickes. This is far higher than national averages for the industry; mentors say that is partly due to the community aspect of it where young people will be encouraged to join by their friends

However, the national picture is still bleak. Indeed, when Conservative minister Nicky Morgan met with the Chicks With Bricks group earlier this year, she admitted: “We clearly still have a long way to go. Stereotypes still persist. For many, a job in construction too often still conjures up an image of a man in a hi-vis jacket on a building site, wearing his trousers slightly lower than he should.

“Women make up half our population and so it is right that we see them able to fulfil their potential and thrive in careers across our economy, including construction.”

Yet, despite everything, there is still reason to remain positive: as Porter points out, with every challenge there is an opportunity: “The fact that there aren’t many women in construction differentiates you – you’ve got an opportunity to be a role model.”

She adds: “You don’t get anywhere in your job by playing on the fact that you’re woman – you have to be good at your job. But you shouldn’t be ashamed of being a woman; you should be comfortable being yourself. And it’s a great industry to be part of.”

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