



Women in the construction trades: Career types and associated barriers



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 September 2015

Revised 12 October 2016

Accepted in revised form 1 December 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Construction industry

Male-dominated work

Typical career paths

Barriers

Spain

Interviews

ABSTRACT

The construction industry is the most segregated sector in Spain, as in other Western countries, particularly with regard to its trades, in which the percentage of women is extremely low. Traditionally, public policies supporting the inclusion of women have analysed the barriers they face without usually accounting for the wide range of companies and employment situations present in the sector. Based on interviews with women workers in the construction industry's trades and using the concept of typical career types, this article analyses the many different barriers faced by women on site. It concludes that the career types and the barriers associated with them are principally the result of the type of company the women work for, a fact to be borne in mind when drawing up any government policy aimed at increasing accessibility of women to the trades of the construction industry.

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Introduction

Although the number of occupations open to women has gradually increased over recent years, these do not include skilled trades in the construction industry. In Spain, as in other Western countries, until 2008, while demand for labour was high, priority was given to policies of integration. As a result of the global financial crisis, from 2007 to 2010, the sector underwent the greatest slump in Spain's recent history.¹ In the present situation, combating discrimination against women and their access to the sector is no longer on the agenda of the Spanish authorities, who are more concerned with the problem of extremely high unemployment. However, although the issue is no longer in the public eye, the fact that there are trades that are occupied almost exclusively by men continues to be a systemic problem, not only because it clearly involves discrimination, but also because it is linked to problems such as bad working conditions, the low prestige of certain trades and disregard for safety (Ibáñez & Narocki, 2012).²

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¹ Employment fell by 57.6%, turnover by 66%, and the contribution of the sector to family incomes through wages and salaries by 62.7% (Fernández-Tabales & Cruz, 2013).

² These authors show how the macho culture observed on site, which values physical effort but shows little concern for safety, coexists with and reinforces a type of work organisation (piecework with great emphasis on speed) that Camino Lopez, Ritzel, Fontaneda, and González Alcántara (2008) associate with accidents and injuries. The same relationship is dealt with by Agapiou (2002), who interviewed male workers in Scotland: he suggests that, if women are present "men are less likely to 'posture' or have to live up to a macho image – an image that is off-putting for many men as well" (p. 703). Here, too, emphasis is placed on how this is related to safety at work. The same idea is defended by the feminist movement, which has traditionally pointed out the benefits of the inclusion of more women in the sector, arguing that if women stayed, it would be because the work was managed along more humane lines, with shorter working days, less of the confrontation associated with the macho culture and consequently greater productivity and efficiency (Greed, 2006: 71).

This paper examines the barriers faced by women working in construction trades in Spain and how these differ according to their employment situation. The aim is to relate each employment situation, analysed using the concept of typical career types, to the different barriers involved, in the belief that equality policies cannot be designed if they are not contextualised.

Barriers faced by women in the construction industry have been analysed from varying points of view and in the context of different countries. Byrd (1999) examined the case of carpentry apprentices in the USA, listing the most common barriers and indicating that women commonly come up against hazing, a "culture of disrespect" and working conditions which make it necessary to "work ever faster", as well as extremely limited access to informal networks. Menches and Abraham (2007) reviewed over 20 academic papers studying women in the construction industry and highlighted barriers related to an overtly masculine culture, a problem also stressed by Agapiou (2002), regarding workers in Scotland, and analysed, using Kanter's (1977) framework of tokenism, in Northern Ireland by Whittock (2002). The culture of the construction industry, marked by hegemonic masculinity (Connell's (1982) concept, based on Gramsci's hegemonic culture), is also the research framework used by Saavedra, Araújo, de Oliveira, and Stephens (2014), regarding women engineers in Portugal; by Wright (2016) in her study of the UK construction and transport sectors; and by Powell and Sang (2015), in this case from a Bourdieusian perspective.

Another barrier is the problem of achieving a balance between work and family life in a context of long working hours. This was studied in male and female professionals/managers by Lingard and Francis (2005), Watts (2009), Navarro-Astor (2011) and Román Onsaló, Ríos Paniagua, and Traverso Cortés (2013).

Finally, the organisational dimension has also been analysed. In South Africa, Martin and Barnard (2013) found that "formal and covert

Table 1
Sample.

Total number of painting students (2004)	29		
Sample base (women locatable)	26		
Women located	23		
Interviews conducted (2010)	19	Interviews conducted (2013–14)	10
Experience in the sector	15	Experience in the sector	
Exclusively in the grey economy	3	Wage-earner	4
In temporary employment on Council employment programmes	4	Wage-earner and self-employed	1
Self-employed.	3	Self-employed	3
Wage-earners in the sector, 2 of them with temporary contracts.	5	Business owner, contractor	2
Situation at the time of the interview		Situation at the time of the interview	
Employed in any sector	6	Employed	8
Employed in the construction sector (1 self-employed, 1 bogus self-employed and 3 wage-earners)	5	Employed in the sector	7
		Grey economy in other sector	1
		Early retirement from the sector	1

organisational practices [...] were the main challenges that women face" (p. 1). Clarke, Pedersen, Michielsens, Susman, and Wall (2004) undertook a first comparison of the situation of women by countries (that is, by the different models of labour relations). With regard to studies of particular projects, the research carried out by Clarke and Gribbling (2008) into the construction of Heathrow Airport's Terminal 5 is worthy of note. However, none of these papers studies how the barriers are related to different career types. That is the objective of this paper.

The study first briefly describes the construction industry in Spain and its highly unregulated nature, before distinguishing the most common types of company in the sector. After a description of the methodology, the third section presents six career types, followed, in the fourth section, by the barriers faced by the women. The discussion then relates career types to barriers, in an attempt to achieve a better understanding of them.

Spain: the low-road model

The highly unregulated nature of the construction industry in Spain makes it an example of what has been called the "low-road model" (Boyer & Gaillard, 2002; Bosch & Philips, 2003; Byrne, Clarke, & Van Der Meer, 2005; Banyuls, Miguélez, Recio, Cano, & Lorente, 2009). This model is based on an extremely unregulated training regime with a clearly hierarchical division between the two types of business in the sector: the large companies, which win building contracts, and the micro-companies, which carry out the manual (and sometimes technical) work. In this sector, little importance is given to formal training, and "on-the-job" training on a master-apprentice basis predominates. Recognition of professional status depends principally on the employer.

The most common type of business comprises micro-companies, which are engaged in intense horizontal competition for the subcontracts from larger firms, to which they are subsidiary.³ In this context, the most common employment arrangements are either on temporary contract/casual work (50% of total employment according to the active population survey EPA 2008TI) or self-employment with sector-specific features (especially "bogus self-employment", where workers make National Insurance payments as if they were self-employed, even though they work continuously and on a stable basis for one company that provides them with the means of production and organises their work). This gives the large companies access to a secondary and sometimes even "grey" work market. Working conditions in these subcontracted

³ This phenomenon has also been called "decentralization of business structure" (Infante et al., 2012: 34). Also consult Martín and González (2010) on the disparity of companies in the sector with regard to size, position and strategic initiative.

companies are far from ideal. As pointed out by Byrne et al. (2005), the low-road model generates conditions in which jobs can be categorized as hard, dirty and degrading.

Methodology

The fieldwork for this study took place in two rounds. The first was in 2010, when interviews were carried out with 17 women who had enrolled for a two-year painting course (2003–05) offered by the Construction Labour Foundation FLC⁴ as part of the EQUAL programme of the EU European Social Fund.⁵ Two researchers, with *ad-hoc* training, interviewed the women who had completed the course. All of the women lived in Asturias and the average duration of the interviews was an hour. In this first round, the interviews were unstructured, analysing each respondent's personal biography, her opinion regarding the training received and her career development (following the traveller metaphor [Kvale, 2011]).

The second round of fieldwork took place in 2013–14, when interviews were carried out with ten women with many years of experience in the sector (at least five years working full time). The interviews lasted between one and 3 h, were carried out by the author and mostly conducted in the respondent's home. The interview consisted of two parts: an unstructured, biographical first part, followed by a second part involving questions prepared in the "Women in Men's Worlds" research group, one of the aims of which is to compare different professions in which women are under-represented (following the miner metaphor (Kvale, 2011)). In this second round, the respondents included six painters, a tiler, a plumber, a contractor, and a woman specialised in industrial coatings and roofing. These women were selected by contacting the FLC, various professional associations and the respondents from 2010. Some of the women themselves then, in turn, referred us to others in the sector (snowball technique). Also, three of the women interviewed in 2010 were "wage earners" (indicating here those with an employment contract, whose employer paid 80% of their National Insurance), and these three were interviewed again in the second round (Table 1).

The objective of the interviews was to progress from the description of a personal and very specific life experience to the "transferability" of typical career types. The term "typical" here refers to the fact that certain structured sequences of work are common to the experience of several workers (similar to the idea of *typical career paths* (Spilerman, 1977)). The term "career types" implies a causal perspective: certain "doors" allow access to different situations, which in turn become doors themselves. In this study, the typical career types imply chains of opportunities observed as a result of different employment situations⁶: self-employed workers, women working for businesses owned by family members and four career types involving "wage earners", divided according to the type of company.

Selection of subjects for the second round was based on the concept of "analytical generalisation".⁷ At a certain point, some typical career types were deemed to be "saturated", that is, the explanatory relationships between the elements had been established, meaning that further interviews would add nothing important to what was already known (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). This theoretical saturation was demonstrated empirically in the cases of the self-employed women (all painters), of

⁴ This is a joint body consisting of business and trade union organisations which, since the end of the 1980s, has been the backbone of the sector's industrial relations in the region. Thanks to subscriptions paid by business owners and workers and public funds, the Foundation maintains a School of Professional Training.

⁵ In addition, two focus groups with entrepreneurs were conducted (in 2005 and 2014) and interviews were held with two managers of professional organisations.

⁶ The second stage of this research is included in the Women in Men's World Project, one of the goals of which is to define career paths of women in extremely masculinised occupations. In the case of construction workers, the paths match their employment modes.

⁷ A reasoned judgement regarding the degree to which the findings of a study can be used as a guide for what might happen in other situations (Kvale, 2011: 163).

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