

Filling the Construction Skills Gap: What's Holding Women Back?

Submitted by: 3B Training

Monday, 4 March 2024

Women in Construction Week (3 - 9 March 2024) celebrates the achievements of women in the construction industry, highlighting their contributions, confronting the challenges they face and inspiring future generations of women.

While there has been significant progress made in recent years, there is still a long way to go to reach equality in the industry. To highlight this, 3B Training has released an infographic, which illustrates how far women have come and where there is still room for improvement.

The infographic shows that in 2023, the UK construction force was 15.8% female with over 340,000 women working in the industry. This is a 3.2% increase since before the pandemic.

Despite this increase, the ratio of women to men is still vastly disproportionate.

For Women in Construction Week, 3B Training interviewed Pamela Evans, founder of Diggerlady to reflect on her experiences of being a woman in the construction industry.

"In school I was told I couldn't be a digger driver, that it's a man's job and I was signposted to different career options such as care work." Fortunately, Pamela didn't let this deter her from continuing her passion and aged just 21, she became the first female and the youngest person in the country to get the 360° Tracked Excavator licence.

These old fashioned attitudes and gender stereotyping aren't the only reason why so few women are looking to join the industry. The lack of awareness around opportunities for women in construction is another significant factor.

A Women into Construction (WIC) survey of 16-25 year olds found that only 13% of women would consider a career in construction. 29% of women thought that construction meant onsite work only, and 45% later said they were more interested in a career in construction after learning about the diverse roles available for women in management.

In an interview with 3B Training, Charlene Wade, Project Manager at Equans said:

"The opportunities in construction aren't all labour based. Some of the skills that women already have are transferable into the construction industry. So if you're an admin or in any kind of leadership or management role, you can use that in construction."

On a positive note, the top three reasons why women find the construction industry appealing include the:

Potential high salary

Opportunity for a long term career

Ability to set up their own business later down the line

“Starting my own business was the best thing I ever did and I encourage other women to start their own business in trades.” said Pamela.

However, Pamela’s journey wasn’t all smooth-sailing...

“Sometimes I’d be the only woman on a site with up to 100 men. Some were supportive, some didn’t bat an eyelid, but there were always some that couldn’t stand the fact that I was there in a ‘male’ industry. I was constantly told I shouldn’t be there, that I shouldn’t be taking a ‘man’s job’. It was difficult to hear but it spurred me on to prove that I was in the right place doing the right job.”

Unfortunately, Pamela isn’t alone when it comes to facing discrimination as a woman in construction. A staggering 72% of women in construction experienced gender discrimination in the workplace, with 41% receiving inappropriate comments from male colleagues and 26% reporting that they felt left out or excluded.

Discrimination is just one of the reasons why women leave the industry. Other factors include:

Unequal growth opportunities compared to men

Lack of access to a women’s toilet

Unequal pay (A study by Rated People found that women get paid just 72% of men’s average pay for trade roles).

Not flexible enough, which can be difficult for women with children.

So how can we address these issues that are keeping women from filling the skills gap?

When asked this question, 47% said that a change to the male dominated culture would be the number one change needed.

1 in 10 women said that better childcare options would be the top change in persuading them to join or stay in the construction industry.

Other factors that help women to stay in the industry include:

Equal pay

Equal growth opportunities

Flexible working hours

Charlene Wade offers the following advice to women looking to join construction:

“Start doing your research online, then start going to events and seminars to put yourself out there. There are schemes out there helping women to join firms. Make sure to work for a firm whose values align with yours.”

Pamela's advice is:

"Speak to other women in construction. Contact the Register of Tradeswomen, go to women in trades events. Don't be deterred by being a minority, it's the only way we can make that change. Women's skills are needed."

You can watch the full interviews with Charlene Wade and 'The Digger Lady' Pamela Evans on the 3B Training YouTube channel.

About 3B Training

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