

MBAWC calls for end to gender discrimination in construction sector

The construction industry in South Africa is currently made up of 88% male and 12% female employees of a total of around 1,395 million people. While the number of women employed in the industry is substantially lower than that of men, this has increased by 60% over the past 10 years.



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Allen Bodill, executive director of the Master Builders Association of the Western Cape (MBAWC), says: “This is great for the industry and the country as a whole. However, the integration and development of women must become a priority if we are to swell these numbers even further. First and foremost, we must stamp out the gender discrimination that still plagues the industry which, in my opinion, is the root cause of its slow transformation.”

Wendy Damon, owner of Damp Control Cape, agrees, saying: “Gender discrimination is one of the biggest challenges I have had to face. Being a woman, I have found that I am not taken seriously and this is something I experience on a daily basis. The general perception is that the construction industry is a man’s world, but through the quality of my work, I have now built up a solid reputation that speaks for itself.”

Dawn Clarke, financial director at Scheltma & Co., concurs: “There is always the perception that women do not understand construction language and that they are unable to go to site and get dirty or climb ladders. Fortunately, I have always felt respected and admired by the men at my company and I believe that that in itself is an achievement in the industry.”

Colleen Alben, owner of AAA Absolute Plumbing, adds that she has encountered discrimination by employees, clients and competitor companies with regards to her experience, physical appearance and skills. “Although I’m not a qualified plumber – having come from a financial background - I have been involved in several construction projects and am able to hold my own.”

All three women have had to work exceptionally hard to prove themselves in this industry and today they each hold illustrious positions within their companies - all of which are MBAWC members.

Ignore the naysayers

Damon, who began her construction career as a receptionist and currently runs a successful business, says: “I am proud of what I have achieved so far and would like to inspire other young women and show them that gender does not have to be a barrier.” Her advice to other women wanting to achieve similar success in male-dominated industries is to ignore the naysayers and the wolf-whistles. “Focus rather on what it is you want to achieve.” Her goal now is to study further, particularly construction law.

Having originally qualified as a chartered accountant, Finlayson’s career highlights have included spending 10 years in Taiwan as a corporate planning manager for Coca-Cola. On her return to South Africa, she was employed as an accountant at Scheltema, before being made a director. “Once I proved myself as being capable, it was easy. It took one and a half years to become a director and I have never looked back.” Now on the cusp of retirement, her words of wisdom for other women are: “Always respect your male colleagues and treat them well even though they may be rough. Be tough and stand your ground.”

Alben, who would like to one day complete her plumbing studies, shares: “Over the last four years, I have managed to assert myself and gain the respect of workers and clients alike, particularly by going onto site with - and learning from - the men. I am proud of my achievements and to me it is an indicator that women can succeed at anything that they put their minds to. I also believe that there is still a lot of work that can be done to open the industry to more women and that women can contribute significantly to the expansion and improvement of the sector.” Looking to the future, she hopes to expand AAA Absolute Plumbing to create more opportunities for people in her community, specifically women.

“We have to eradicate gender discrimination in the construction industry and hasten transformation so that our daughters feel at ease taking their rightful place next to their brothers in building South Africa,” concludes Bodill.

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