

Chapter 5

Systemic Gender Barriers in the Building and Construction Industry: Co-preneurs as Managers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines structural gender-based disadvantage experienced by women in the building industry. This is found in trade and technical occupations, but is much more prevalent in administrative and management roles in small and micro businesses where female family members and spouses carry out work often for little or no remuneration or recognition. Nor does this group have any protection in income support, injury or sickness cover or retirement benefits. This also contributes to inefficiency in the industry as there is minimal opportunity for professional development or skill enhancement. Using a non-positivist methodology, the authors found that this phenomenon is particularly prevalent in the building and construction and that many were unpaid and were employed in other occupations. This disadvantage contributed to status driven tensions between these women, often called co-preneurs, and those women working on site in trade and technical roles.

INTRODUCTION

‘Co-preneurs’ (Lewis & Massey, 2011) are defined as women who are in business partnerships (either formal or informal) with a spouse or life partner. The research outlined in this chapter reveals that co-preneurial women working as administrators and managers in smaller firms in the building industry frequently experience isolation, poor access to career development and low levels of self-esteem; and these factors are detrimental to their wellbeing and productivity and the productivity of the industry

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overall. This phenomenon is likely to be present in other industries and industrialised societies with similar family structures. The authors investigated why a ‘glass ceiling’ effect preventing women from reaching senior levels in employment is also evident in the context of co-preneurs. Three inter-related causes were evident: structural factors that effectively prevent women from forming networks and relationships that will facilitate their advancement and increase their productivity; a blurring of distinctions between private and public elements to the biographies of the female co-preneurs; and logistical factors that inhibit the capacity of co-preneur women in this industry to access skill development and enhancement opportunities.

These phenomena will be further explored throughout the chapter.

BACKGROUND

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that as at October 2010 the building and construction industry was Australia’s fourth largest industry in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employed around 9% of the Australian workforce (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). There are some 352,000 construction businesses in Australia, of which 60% have no paid employees. Strikingly, only about 3% of building and construction enterprises have more than 20 employees (ABS 2010, 2012). Thirty per cent of all independent contractors work in the Construction Industry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), often sole trader owner-operators with the support of their spouse.

Typically women in Australia have rarely found employment in the building and construction industry. In 2011, women comprised 11.7% of the industry workforce (ABS, 2012). While there has been some movement since the 1980s with young women entering trade occupations, these tend to be women with existing family connections to the industry with the benefit of robust mentoring (Dee & Cowling, 2011; Fielden et al, 2000). Nevertheless, women still constitute less than two per cent of tradespeople in the Australian building and construction industry (ABS, 2012). Larger firms in Australia are more likely to appoint women. In recent times Australian women have increasingly found employment in managerial and executive roles in the industry, such as in site management and project design in larger enterprises (Fielden et al, 2000).

The introduction of affirmative action legislation in the late twentieth century focused on large employers and subsequent industry initiatives to comply with this regulatory framework has only resulted in a small degree of cultural change. Businesses with less than 100 employees are not subject to equal opportunity or affirmative action legislation (WGEA 2014), and thus have escaped scrutiny until now.

In the Australian state of Tasmania, the site for this research project, Building and Construction is the State’s third largest employing industry. More than ninety percent of Tasmania’s 5857 building and construction businesses are micro, small or medium sized enterprises [SME], in fact 64% have no employees (ABS, 2011). Within employing SMEs, there are almost no women in trade and managerial roles, although it is common for administrative support to be undertaken by female family members. It is this significant yet invisible group who are the subjects of this chapter. Previous research on women in family enterprises suggest that they are partners, spouses, mothers or siblings of the owner/ operator, with legal status ranging from full partnership or co-directorship to arrangements with no formal recognition (Folker et al 2002; Firkin 2001). They may be unpaid or poorly remunerated, or receive no payment (Phillips 2008; Lee et al 2006). Some also have other paid occupations, and it is common for them to have extensive family commitments and household responsibilities (Firkin & Massey, 2001; Folker et al,

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