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Graduating female students' long-term career decisions and under-representation of females in South Africa's construction industry

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ABSTRACT

For many years, the construction industry in South Africa has had an under-representation of females. In contrast to what the industry is experiencing, South African universities have, nonetheless, been experiencing a rise in the number of female students entering and graduating from the built environment fields. The rise, however, has not been reflected in the workplace over the years. It can then be reasoned that, during their studies, female students (particularly the graduating female students [GFS]) experience some barriers which they perceive to be a reflection of South Africa's construction industry. GFS have the perception that the construction industry's traditions, organisational cultures and sexist environment play an essential role in determining their eventual entry and the length of their career within the construction industry.

By using the career construction theory (CCT), the study was able to develop questions to identify factors that motivated GFS to pursue a construction-related degree. This study also explored how the internal barriers experienced during the GFS construction education process influenced the long-term career decision of the GFS. The CCT was further used to develop questions on how GFS perceive females who work in the industry, the external barriers faced by females and how the barriers shape their long-term career decisions. Additionally, the leaky bucket theory was adopted to understand the possible leaks in the construction education process of the GFS. The leaky bucket theory was then used to develop questions that assess why the construction industry has an under-representation of females, despite the increase in the number of female students registering for and graduating from the built environment disciplines in the universities in South Africa.

GFS registered for their BSc (Honours) in Quantity Surveying, Construction Management, and Bachelors of Architecture at two purposively sampled universities in South Africa were participants of this study. 50 GFS were targeted and in total, 39 of the 50 from the two universities completed the online questionnaire, giving a response rate of 78%. Using Qualtrics, structured online questionnaires were distributed to GFS. The data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential data analysis. The analysis revealed, through the relative rank, that the "career opportunities available to the GFS and the promising financial stability" accompanying employment in the construction industry were major motivating factors that inspired their choice to study a built environment- or construction-related degree. It was also revealed through the study that the internal barriers that the GFS faced at the universities have

a major influence on their perceptions of the construction industry. Gender stereotypes coupled with the masculine nature of the construction industry were major external barriers that the GFS perceived to be of major concern for females in the construction industry.

The implications of the empirical findings support the fact that GFS have remained an unexploited and untapped resource in South Africa. If South Africa's construction industry continuously fails to attract and retain the current and emerging pool of GFS, the leaky pipeline that the construction industry is currently experiencing through the different internal and external factors will persist and, eventually, result in a critical labour shortage in the long run. Generally, a shortage of labour causes sluggish economic and infrastructural developments in any country; more so, in South Africa where gender transformation has been identified as important for sustainable economic development. Consequently, the main conclusion of this study is that the construction industry in South Africa needs to attract and retain the current and emerging pool of GFS to diversify, transform and tackle the problem of under-representation of females in the industry.

The limitations of this study include the small sample size, covering only two South African universities. This purposively stratified sample excludes other South African universities which may have offered a different insight into their long-term career decisions. It is recommended that a similar future study would increase population size and conduct a longitudinal study with the surveyed GFS to follow their careers.

Keywords: Barriers, Career decisions, Construction education, Construction industry, Graduating female students.

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