

Gender Gap in the Construction Industry's Consultancy: Is This a Threat to Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5?

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ABSTRACT

The target date for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5, one of the 2030 UN Agenda [Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)], is fast approaching. Studies have shown that the construction industry has a role in achieving many SDGs, including Goal 5 in developing countries. However, studies regarding achieving Goal 5 (Gender Equality) in the industry regarding female consultancy participation are scarce and complexly interrelated because of societal problems and divergence. Thus, this study aims to investigate factors hindering gender equality in construction consultants' career growth and suggest measures to encourage more female construction consultants through policy to achieve Goal 5 in Nigeria. The study adopted face-to-face data collection via a qualitative mechanism. This is an ongoing study. The first phase covered Lagos, Nigeria, and adopted a thematic approach to analyse the collected data. The perceived major encumbrances facing Nigerian construction consultants regarding gender equality are religious/cultural, family/marital, marginalised identities, microaggressions, absence of career advancement, absence of mentors/role models, consultancy fees discrimination (gender pay gap), bullying and discrimination, and lax equity and inclusion. Achieving Goal 5 will be a mirage if these issues are not addressed. Thus, the study recommended measures to motivate females to study construction-related programmes and employment opportunities, including consultancy services slots through policy mechanisms to achieve Goal 5. As part of the implications, the study identifies major hindrances facing female Nigerian construction consultants and proffers measures to improve gender equality to achieve Goal 5.

Keywords: Construction industry, Consultancy, Encumbrance, Gender gap, Nigeria, Sustainable development goal

INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda adopted by the UN Member States in 2015 generated 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with targets and indicators for each goal. The goals define the aspirations of the member countries, focusing on goal-based global governance (Eden and Wagstaff, 2021). This study focuses on Goal 5 (Gender Equality). The SDGs is all-inclusiveness concerning environmental, social, and economic targets of the Sustainable Development (SD). The UN (2015a, p. 14) avowed that Goal 5 aim is to “.... *achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.*” The SDGs are not the first UN policy document to capture the interest of gender equality. Gender equality was represented in the previous UN working document (2000–2015 Millennium Development Goal). It was transformed into SDG 5 in the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015b). The essence of Goal 5 is to accomplish gender equality and empower girls and women by eradicating gender discrimination, inequalities, and vehemence against womenfolk (UN, 2015a). This has become germane because, in the 90s, women in paid employment besides agriculture accounted for 35% and moved to about 41% (Adeosun and Owolabi, 2021). This is significant progress because of awareness, but there is space for improvement to enhance inclusion and eliminate discrimination against the female gender. Studies (Worsdale and Wright, 2020; Adeosu and Owolabi, 2021) discussed that gender equality may enhance economic growth. Their submission corroborated Archibong (2018) and Adegbite and Machethe (2020). They reported that the International Monetary Fund found that bridging the gender gap is critical to improving economic progress, especially in developing countries like Nigeria. From Kleven and Landais (2017) and Falk and Hermlé (2018) studies, they found that gender inequality insignificantly impacts the economy.

The United Nations (2019) identified ten of the SDGs that are gender specific. It indicates that Goal 5 is important and crosscut many SDGs in the Agenda 2030. Also, it reported that Goal 5 is fragmented into nine targets and 14 indicators. Also, ten of the SDGs include gender-specific indicators. UNCTAD (2016) emphasised gender equality so that males and females could access the same rights, privileges, opportunities, and benefits. Gender equality is a “*fundamental human right and the keystone of a prosperous, modern economy that provides sustainable, inclusive growth*” (OECD, 2017, p. 3). This implies equal handling of men and women in society and office (Eden and Gupta, 2017; UNCTAD, 2018; UN Economic Commission for Europe, 2019). In this ongoing study, the first phase focused on workplace gender regarding job placement as women construction consultants in practice for sustainability. This may be challenging for the women folks. Suresh et al. (2023) acknowledged work-life balance factors, dissection, wages gap, and gender stereotyping and discrimination as possible causes of gender inequality. Eden and Wagstaff (2021) identified inadequate funding (US\$2.5 trillion estimated shortfall) and lax government implementation as possible causes, leading to complications and other societal problems. Breuer et al. (2019) avowed that the inability to translate many targets into measurable indicators could contribute to failure to meet the goals.

The Banwell Report (1964), the Egan Report (2002), Construction 2025 (2013), the UN SDGs (2017), and the Industrial Strategy Construction Sector Deal (HM Government) (2018) discussed women's inequality in the construction industry from an international perspective. It implies that it's a global issue and may still exist in Nigeria even with the government implementation of the adopted National Gender Policy in 2006 and the NHRC, which aligns with the Agenda 2030. In the United Kingdom, Opoku and Williams (2019) discovered that gender prejudice hinders the career development of females in the construction industry. Also, Suresh et al. (2023) studied the UK women's construction industry and recommended viable measures to improve women's intake in the sector. Proffering measures to this gap has become germane because of the threat to gender equality and, by extension, to the SDGs. Also, 22 issues were identified in the USA as perceived encumbrances facing women construction workers (Pamidimukkala and Kermanshachi, 2022). In China, studies have shown that women's leadership can increase work engagement and reduce emotional exhaustion (Khan et al., 2022). Hence, women should be encouraged to hold managerial positions via flexible conditions. McKinsey and Company (2020) avowed that enhanced flexible working is key to retaining women in the sector. Whether these issues apply to the Nigerian women's context is yet to be determined. More so, the National Gender Policy (2006) explained that gender equality is a development technique for mitigating poverty in Nigeria. Afolabi et al. (2019) ranked the Nigerian construction industry among the top gender-segregated sectors with anti-feminine qualities in the work growth gap, symbolic intimidation, and pay/position gap. This is of concern in the context of Goal 5. Adogbo et al. (2015) discovered that Nigerian women are under-represented in the sector.

Studies showed the benefits of workplace women's contributions to the economy. However, preliminary findings reveal encumbrances are facing sustainable careers of women construction consultants in Nigeria's construction industry. This is of concern to stakeholders and may become a threat to achieving Goal 5 if not addressed. The SDGs, including the Goal 5 issue, maybe more challenging with the recent global pandemic (COVID-19) that lasted for 18 months (Ebekozi and Aigbavboa, 2021; Ebekozi et al., 2023). Regarding Goal 5 and the construction industry, a few studies have been conducted but are not specific and in-depth to women's consultancy participation in developing countries. Sertyesilisik (2022) is engrossed in how women's employment can improve achieving SDGs but with insufficient underpinning of Goal 5. Adeyemi et al. (2006) researched women's under-representation in the industry. Afolabi et al. (2019) focused on balancing women's identity in the Nigerian construction sector. Others are women empowerment (Adeosun and Owolabi, 2021), Nigerian women's work-life experience in the industry (Tunji-Olayeni et al., 2021), and women entrepreneurship and its implications on the economy (Gawel and Mroczek-Dabrowska, 2022). The reviewed literature shows the research gap. It reveals insufficient recent studies in developing countries' construction industries, specifically on women construction consultants. Also, as part of the study's

motivations, to investigate if Nigerian women practicing as construction consultants are still facing encumbrances with the government implementation of the adopted National Gender Policy in 2006 and the National Human Rights Commission (established by the NHRC Act, 1995 as amended), which aligns with the Agenda 2030. This study will fill the gap. Thus, this study aims to investigate encumbrances facing gender equality in construction consultants' career growth and suggest measures to encourage more female construction consultants through policy to achieve Goal 5 in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design. Creswell and Creswell (2018) affirmed that phenomenology is utilised when research gains a novel of the underlying issues. The researchers adopted a face-to-face semi-structured interview approach and supplemented it with the reviewed literature. This aligns with Opoku and Williams (2019), Ebekoziem (2020a), and Suresh et al. (2023). They gained interviewees' perception knowledge using a methodology that activates inner opinions and emotions. Ebekoziem (2020b) and Ebekoziem et al. (2021a, 2021b) affirmed that semi-structured interviews offer the participant the privilege to give insight and in-depth into their experiences. Opoku and Williams (2019) studies adopted a semi-structured interview of 12 experts to explore women's leadership gap concerning gender issues in the United Kingdom construction firms. Concerning the employed purposeful sampling, the researchers targeted interviewees knowledgeable in the subject area, as presented in Table 1. This is an ongoing study. The first phase covered Lagos. Lagos is one of the top-ranked commercial and construction hubs in Nigeria. The study concealed the participants' identities for confidentiality reasons. This aligns with Ebekoziem (2020b) and Ibrahim et al. (2022). The interviews took 60 minutes per interviewee via recording with the participants' approval. This phase was held in Lagos between September and October 2023 and was recorded using an Android phone with the participants' permission.

Table 1. Description of the participants' background.

Main details	Results
Number of participants	12 women participants
Years of experience	Above ten years
Type of firm/rank	Private practice/a resident consultant
Gender equality and female construction consultants' awareness	Knowledgeable
Location	Lagos (P1 – P12)
Academic qualification	Minimum of HND/BSc./B.Tech.
Professional qualification	Min. of corporate/associate members
Construction discipline	Quantity Surveyor (P1 – P2) Architect (P3 – P5) Engineer (P6 – P8) Project Manager (P9 – P10) Construct. Manager/Builder (P11 – P12)

Source: Authors work

The researchers transcribed verbatim and accomplished saturation at the 10th participant. Saunders et al. (2019) opined that saturation is when no new perceptions are created through additional data. The researchers engaged selected Quantity Surveyors, Architects, Engineers, Project Managers, and Construction Contractors/Builders in Lagos. The study generated 45 codes from the 12 manually analysed documents via thematic analysis (Ebekozi et al., 2021a; 2021b). From the six sub-themes, two themes emerged, as presented in the next section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The section presents results and a discussion as they emerged from the study.

Theme 1: Perceived Encumbrances Facing Women Construction Consultants in Practice

An imbalance in construction consultants gender threatens achieving Goal 5 if not checked. Thus, this theme identifies the encumbrances facing women construction consultants' careers. The perceived major encumbrances include religious/cultural, family/marital, marginalised identities, microaggressions, absence of career advancement, absence of mentors/role models, consultancy fees discrimination (gender pay gap), and lax equity and inclusion (majority). Others are bullying, discrimination, gender stereotypes, policy disconnection, and lack of politics and networking. Regarding religious/cultural and family/marital encumbrances, findings reveal that the issues are entrenched in the mind of an average African person and need in-depth and consistent re-orientation. This is because of the long-standing customs and traditions influencing the construction industry (majority). The perception and the societal expectation from any young girl is to marry become a full housewife. This hinders the few females who might have studied construction-related disciplines and wish to practice as consultants (P2, P5, & P12).

Regarding bullying and discrimination, Participant P6 says, “.....*bullying in this construction sector is real. On several occasions, I have been a victim because I'm a female consultant. If not for my husband's support and encouragement, I would have long quit this man-dominated profession and practice....*” The perception that the construction industry belongs to men has a long history and can only be mitigated through re-orientation and all-inclusive integrated equity and inclusion. The findings agree with those of Adeosun and Owolabi (2021). They found that women, including women construction consultants, face discrimination, like the gender pay gap, which limits their full capacity. Gawel and Mroczek-Dabrowska (2022) described the gender pay gap as a system where women receive lower incomes than men for the same job schedule. In some cases, women are deliberately frustrated and left with no choice but to accept the lower wages (P1, P2, P6, P10, & P11).

Theme 2: Measures to Improve Women Construction Consultants in Practice

This sub-section provides measures to improve women construction consultants' participation in practice, even at an elderly age. Thus, seven main

items emerged as measures to improve women construction consultants' participation in practice. This includes:

- Workplace flexibility and remote work (majority).
- Balance equity and inclusion in higher education institutions admission processes (P1, P2, P7, P10, & P11).
- Relevant ministries/departments/agencies should engage equity and inclusion in engaging construction professionals as consultants (majority).
- Invest in career advancement for women (P2, P3, P4, P7, P9 & P12).
- Increase female admission slots for construction related-programmes (majority).
- Develop policies to balance inclusiveness in appointment and mentorship (majority).
- Professional bodies have a role to play in sustaining women's construction consultancy (majority).

Among the seven emerging measures, workplace flexibility and remote work, relevant ministries/departments/agencies should engage equity and inclusion in engaging construction professionals as consultants, increase female admission slots for construction related-programmes, develop policies to balance inclusiveness in appointment and mentorship, and professional bodies have a role to play in sustaining women's construction consultancy were frequently cited by participants as measures to improve women construction consultants participation in practice. "..... *can institutional framework function without relevant authorities support? In all these, the role of the government or relevant authorities from the girl child to womanhood cannot be over-emphasised, especially in an African setting.....*" said Participant P9. This is germane because of the significance of women to the economy. The findings agree with Afolabi et al. (2019) and Suresh et al. (2023). They opined that improving women's involvement in the construction workplace will improve the achievement of gender equality (Goal 5).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research investigated encumbrances facing gender equality in construction consultants' career growth and suggested measures to encourage more female construction consultants' through policy to achieve Goal 5 in Nigeria. The researchers collected data from 12 experts in Lagos, Nigeria, via face-to-face techniques and analysed it manually. The study utilised the in-depth review of extant relevant literature to reduce these limitations. The study revealed that despite the role of gender equality in enhancing the economic growth and productivity of women in leadership positions, there is a discrimination gap in the workplace against the female gender. Presently, the gender equality of women in construction consultants' careers is not encouraging. The study recommended measures to encourage more female construction consultants through policy to achieve Goal 5 in Nigeria. This includes:

- i. An all-inclusive and comprehensive integrated institutional framework to connect the flow from the girl child to higher education institutions where construction-related discipline will be studied and followed up

- with an enabling environment through mentors/role models to practice as a construction consultant cannot be over-emphasised. This should be supported with relevant incentives like scholarships, grants, or stipends to female students studying construction-related disciplines and ensuring higher education institutions' admission priorities.
- ii. Also, policies and programmes tailored towards encouraging women to venture into private practices should be encouraged by various regulatory professional bodies within the construction industry. These policies should be feminine friendly, including consultancy appointments for jobs and other related national assignments within the various regulatory bodies and government.

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