

Assessment of the Challenges and Opportunities of Women in the Construction Industry of Bhutan

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Abstract

Construction sector being one of the biggest sectors in terms of its economic activities (16% GDP and 5.1% workforce) and considering the long operational life of infrastructure, assessing gender parity in construction industries becomes inevitable. Gender mainstreaming can reinforce gender inequalities for decades, wasting limited financial resources and putting lives at risk. Evidently, it is also equally important to promote gender equality and empowerment of women. However, in Bhutan's construction industry, women face numerous challenges that limit their participation and representation in infrastructure project planning, implementation, and monitoring. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to assess the challenges faced by women and their opportunities in the construction industry of Bhutan. Data was collected from 116 respondents who worked under various sectors including government, corporations and private firms. Relative importance indices were evaluated from the data collected and pareto charts were developed for the analysis and to present the results. Recommendations have been presented from both the respondents and the authors which could be implemented to address the challenges faced by women in the construction industry.

Key Words: Construction Industry, Relative Important Index, Pareto chart, Gender Mainstreaming

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender disparity is a social phenomenon where the people are given unfair treatment based on gender. In such cases, the access to opportunities and resources are limited to women and priority is given to men. It is one of the major reasons contributing to the global gender gap, where women are mostly affected. In Bhutan, gender disparities exist especially in tertiary education, labor force participation and decision making (Pema, 2017). Currently, there are uneven mainstreaming of gender issues across policies, plans and projects in the country. Whereas, there are many provisions in place without adequate accountability or proper monitoring approaches (NCWC, 2020).

Underdeveloped and gender-blind infrastructure are some of the main cases for the inability of women and girls to access the basic services to support their upward social mobility and reduce the gender gap (UNOPS, 2020). Women and girls are disproportionately affected by persistent gender inequalities when accessing infrastructure especially during the times of a crisis like COVID-19 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2020). Women and men do not benefit equally from public

investments as men overwhelmingly dominate infrastructure decision making even when the projects are targeted towards female (OECD, 2020). International organizations and multilateral banks have all emphasized that projects under construction industries are more often effective in reaching their objectives when they take into account of gender equality and women's empowerment (ADB, 2015).

Women entrepreneurs generate the same amount of profit per unit revenue as men. Women's returns to scale are significantly larger than men's, implying that women would gain more from increasing their scale (Sabarwal et al., 2008). According to Naoum et al. (2019), both men and women regarded improved flexible working-arrangements, transparent promotion criteria, return-to-work training, and outreach programs to schools the most crucial initiatives to retain women. There are many opportunities for women in industries, closer analysis of which shows that women entering the industries are met with gender-biased attitudes, discrimination and unrealistic demands (Norberg, 2020).

Focusing exclusively on the return on investment (ROI) of diversity becomes more about compliance than about building a culture that leverages the innovation of a diverse workforce (The catalyst, 2014). As per McKinsey Global Institute (2020), women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to crisis than men's jobs. Also, women make up 39 percent of global employment but account for 54 percent of overall job losses. It was even estimated that the global GDP growth could be \$1 trillion lower in 2030 than it would be if no actions are taken now. According to the institute, taking action now to advance gender equality could be valuable, adding \$13 trillion to global GDP in 2030 compared with the gender-regressive scenario. If gender equality is achieved by 2030, \$20T could be added to global economy. Incorporating elements of genders in construction industries could cost additional 1%-5% of total cost. Women representing 30% or more of the senior leadership team or the board of directors, a company can be up to 64% more profitable than an organization run just by men (Global Group, 2021).

According to The Global Gender Gap Index 2022, Bhutan ranks 126 out of 146. It has been reported that bullying and sexual harassment in hydropower sites in the past three years are 12.14 percent, 14.78 percent and 9.23 percent respectively (The Bhutanese, 2022). Road construction sites during the same time, for workplace incivility, bullying and sexual harassment are 16.00 percent, 8.00 percent and 12.00 percent respectively. Moreover, in the bridge construction sites, it was observed 33.33 percent, 22.22 percent and 11.11 percent respectively. Ministry of Labor and Human Resources have registered 5, 831 candidates seeking for jobs at construction sites. Of the total registered candidates 2,045 are women of which they could engage only 175 women (The Bhutanese, 2021). In contrast, the total men registered under BBP is 3,786 of which 393 got engaged.

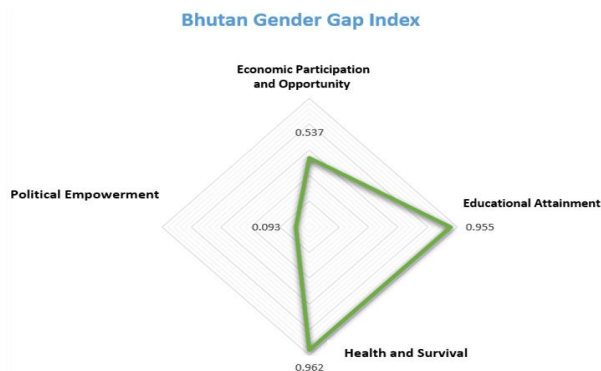


Fig - 1: Bhutan's Gender Gap Index (Global Gender Gap Index 2022 Report)

In Bhutan's construction industry, women face numerous challenges that limit their participation and representation in infrastructure project planning, implementation, and monitoring. Despite the government's commitment to gender mainstreaming and gender equality, there is a lack of understanding of the specific challenges faced by women in the construction industry, and limited efforts to address these challenges. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges and opportunities for women in Bhutan's construction industry in relation to gender mainstreaming in the construction industries in Bhutan.

2. Methodology

The methodology followed by the present study is as shown in Fig - 1. A thorough desk study inclusive of previously carried out researches and published pieces of works related to the current research, newspapers and all scholarly works. The research is designed in a way that covers enough sample population. The data was collected through questionnaire survey and face to face interviews to all the active members of the construction industries. The survey and the interviews were designed in a way to collect information regarding the challenges and opportunities of women in the construction industry of Bhutan. Relative importance indices were calculated to carry out the data analysis. Details of the analysis is presented in section 3. Data Analysis and Results

3. Data Analysis and Results

Considering the nature of the research, firstly desk study was carried out from the researches done by various scholars, reports and newspapers. Following the literature review, questionnaire was designed considering the cross-sectional survey design and the sample population was drawn. The focus group for the research are the government, private and corporate employees. Data was collected from a total of 116 respondents from the various sectors mentioned. The questionnaire was designed mainly focusing the challenges and opportunities for women in the construction industry.

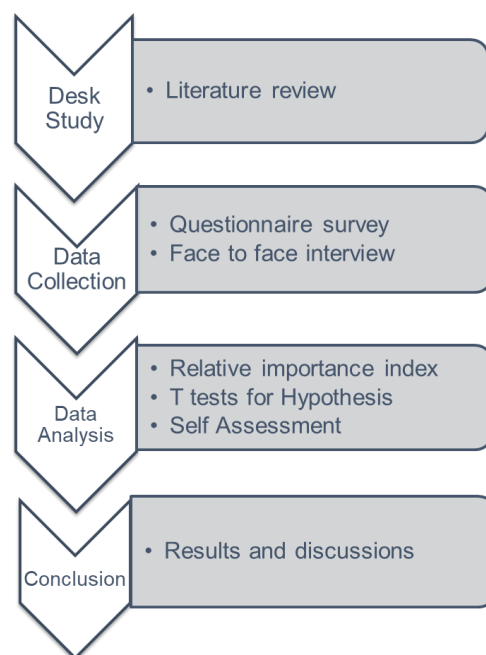


Fig - 2: Research Methodology

3.1 Significant challenges and opportunities of women in construction industry

The respondents were basically the different organizational level employees from managers to site engineers. Data collection included both face to face interview and questionnaire survey, followed by data analysis using relative importance index for various parameters.

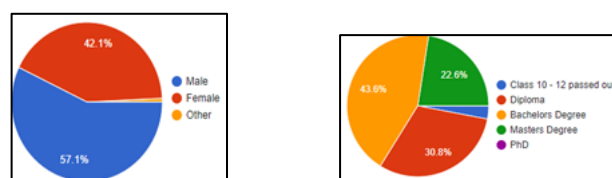


Fig - 3: Gender and Qualification

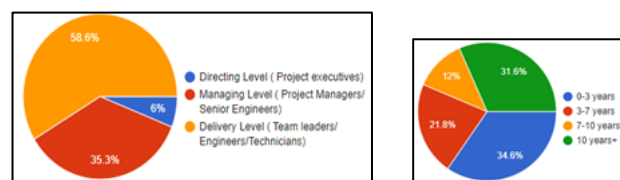


Fig - 4: Organization level and Work Experience



Fig - 5: Employer category and Private firm size

The general information gathered from the respondents included the gender type, their qualification, what type of firms do they work at, the posts that they hold in the firms and their work experiences. Out of 116 respondents, 42.1% were female with majority of the respondents having the qualification of

bachelors' degree. Moreover, 30.8% and 22.6% had completed diploma and masters' courses respectively.

Additional information is as shown in Fig - 4 and Fig - 5 with regards to the employer category, various posts held by the respondents and their work experiences. The respondents included almost equal participation from all the sectors of government, corporations and private firms. The responses to the open-ended questions that capture the most significant impediments for women to take management positions in Bhutan are provided below in Table 1, fundamentally to strengthen the notion that there exist difficulties for women to obtain management positions in Bhutan.

Table 1: Challenges faced by Women to enter managerial posts

Respondent	The biggest barriers for women to enter into management positions in Bhutan
1	Empowerment and trust in decision making especially in terms of contract work.
2	Additional burden that women, in general, have to carry being the caregiver or the homemaker. This puts equal demand on time and energy for many working women in the construction industry which ultimately leads to many women having to make a choice between their career and family.
3	Lack of awareness of gender-based violence and gender sensitiveness in the workplace, especially in the lower level of an organization.
4	Bhutan cultural, societal norms and stereotypes
5	Due to the remoteness of construction areas, women are not intrigued by the construction management sector.

From the responses received, result analysis was carried out to evaluate the relative importance index (RII) for the biggest barriers for women to enter into management positions in the Bhutanese construction industry. The indices have been presented in the form of pareto chart which indicates that if lack of representation & role models, societal norms & gender stereotypes and bias in hiring & promotion is taken care, 80% of the problems for women to enter into management positions will be solved.

3.2 Challenges women face in management positions in the construction industry

The responses to the open-ended questions that capture the challenges women face in management positions in the construction sector in Bhutan is as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Challenges faced by women in managerial posts

Respondent	Challenges women face in management positions in the construction industry in Bhutan in terms of work-life balance
1	Long maternity leave discourages private companies to recruit.
2	Lack of enabling policies in place to support working mothers who are in a managerial position.
3	Workplace policies are not inclusive of gender roles and needs.
4	Working odd hours.
5	The requirement of management services during off hours and odd hours is a challenge for female managers in the construction sector.

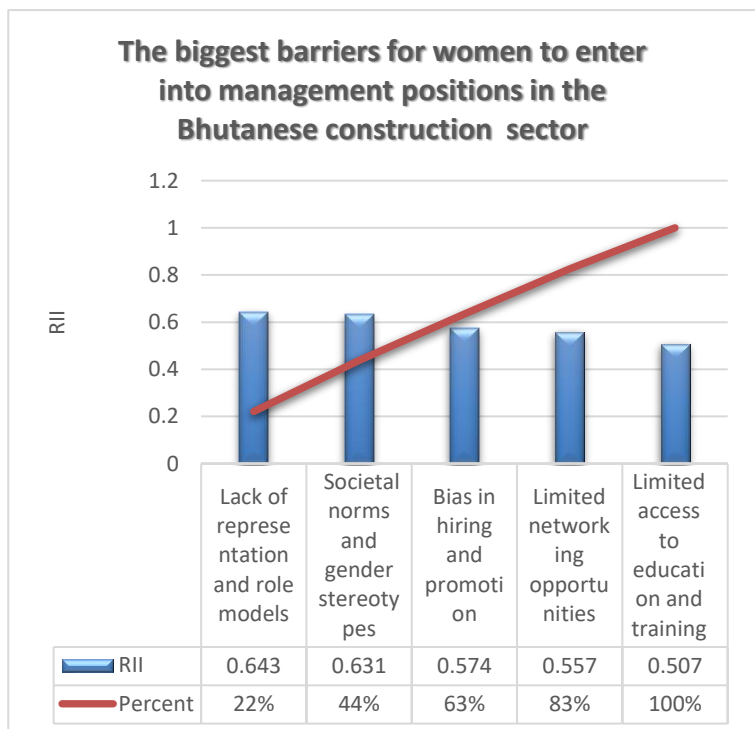


Fig - 6: Relative importance Index in the form of Pareto Chart

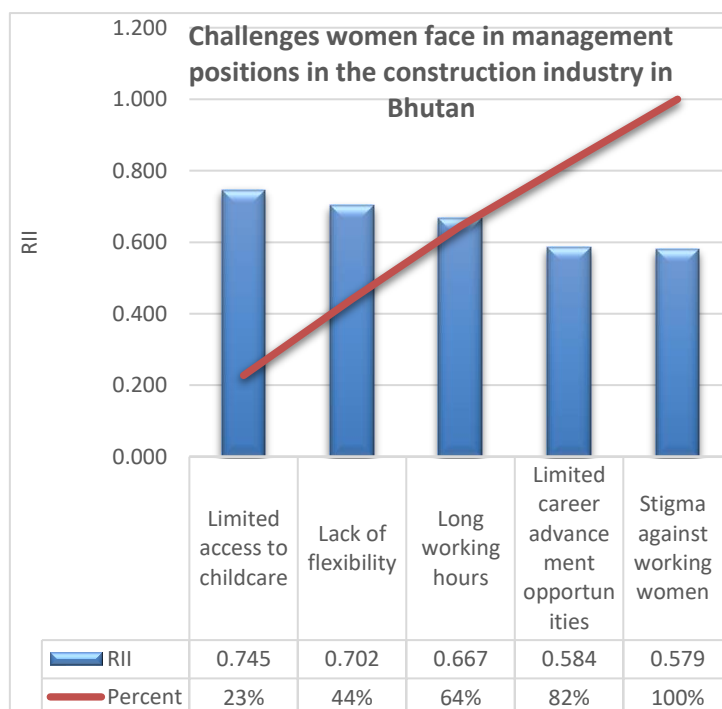


Fig - 7: Relative importance index in the form of Pareto Chart

From the responses received, RII was calculated for the challenges women face in management positions in the construction industry in Bhutan in terms of work-life balance. The indices have been presented in the form of pareto chart in Fig - 7 which indicates that if limited access to child care, lack of flexibility and long working hours are managed, 80% of the challenges faced by women in the management positions will be addressed.

3.3 How to address challenges faced by women in the construction industry?

The responses to the open-ended questions that capture the answers to what could organizations and individuals do to support the advancement of women in management positions in the construction industry in Bhutan is as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Solutions to address challenges faced by women in construction industry

Respondent	What can organizations and individuals do to support the advancement of women in management positions in the construction industry in Bhutan?
1	Share the workload.
2	Encourage more women representatives in the decision-making levels.
3	Increase workplace awareness of gender inequality.
4	Support women in construction management by giving training and giving tours to develop countries to exchange ideas.
5	Increasingly it is difficult for women to take up jobs because they have to care for children as maids are not available in the country.

From the responses received, again the RII was calculated and the indices have been presented in the form of pareto chart in Fig - 8 which indicates that if first 4 suggestions to address the challenges are given importance, 80% of the challenges faced by women in the construction industry will be resolved.

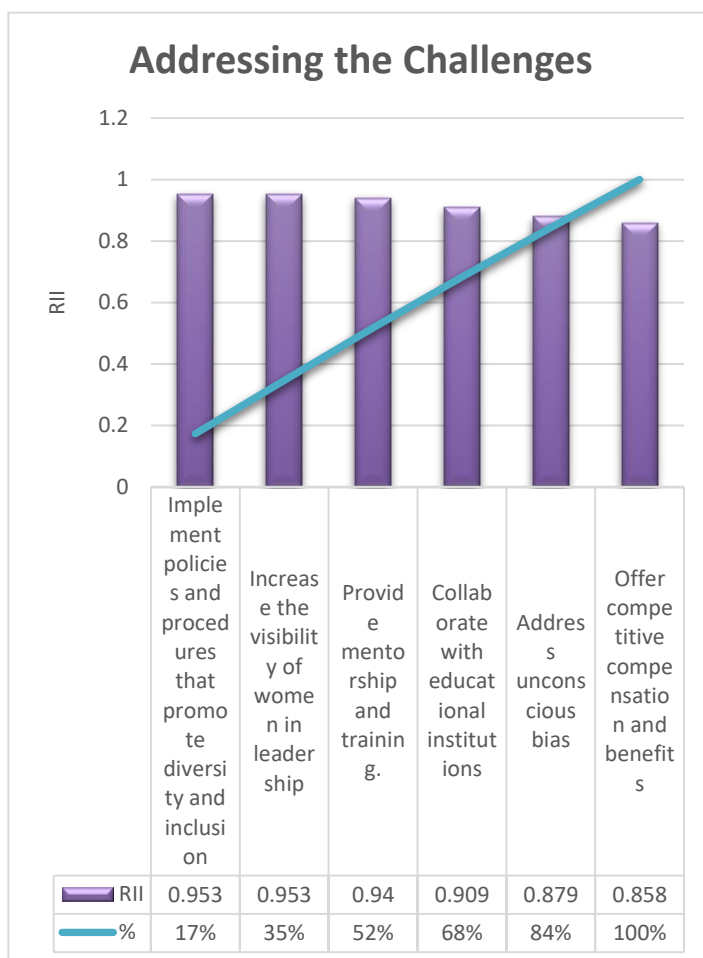


Fig - 8: Relative importance index in the form of Pareto Chart

4. CONCLUSIONS

The current study focused on the significant challenges faced by women construction industry and their opportunities. The details of the findings from the survey and interview are presented in detail under section 3. Data Analysis and Results Suggestions are also expressed by the respondents which can help address the challenges faced by women in the construction industry in Bhutan. Moreover, strategies to enhance gender-responsive infrastructure development in Bhutan based on international best practices can also be employed in order to resolve the issues. Developing gender mainstreaming guidelines and checklists, establishing gender-responsive procurement, developing and implementing gender-sensitive training programs for project staff and contractors, establishing partnerships with civil society organizations and finally establishing gender-sensitive grievance mechanisms can be few other recommendations to address the challenges faced by women in the construction industry in Bhutan.

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