Empowering female students to be successful professionals in the construction industry

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Abstract. The aim of this research is to empower female students who are studying construction related disciplines to be successful professionals in the Indonesian construction industry. The women’s empowerment is in line with the Indonesian Government’s long-term national development plan year 2005-2025. This research also contributes to improving the skills shortage in the Indonesian construction industry which has the biggest market share in Southeast Asia. This qualitative research employs semi-structured interviews with two groups of informants: female students in construction related disciplines and female leaders in the construction industry. A thematic analysis was then carried out to capture their key insights on factors that can empower female students and career success factors for women in the construction industry. The research findings contribute to advancing women empowerment principles, originally proposed by the UN Women Report (2018), by proposing four powerful principles to empower female students to be successful professionals in the Indonesian construction industry.

1. Introduction

The construction industry is a significant industry that supports the macroeconomic growth in Indonesia. Overall, this industry contributes 10.37% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Indonesia [1]. Further demonstrating the importance of the industry, the Ministry of Public Works and Public Housing received the biggest portion of the national budget in 2019 [2]. The Indonesian Government has also shown a strong commitment to develop the country’s infrastructure, including its digital infrastructure due to the COVID-19 pandemic [3].

Despite its significance, the Indonesian construction industry is facing a serious skills shortage issue. According to the Construction Statistics Report in 2018, among the 7.06 million people who work in this industry, only four per cent are university graduates from construction related disciplines. Furthermore, the industry lacks gender diversity as only two per cent of its workforce are females and only 16% of those females are university graduates from construction related disciplines. Attracting women to enter the industry and empowering them, therefore, are needed to improve gender diversity and address skills shortage in the Indonesian construction industry.
Haruna et al. [4] mentioned that women are under-represented in the Nigerian construction industry and recommended a better pathway to increase women’s participation and address the industry’s skills shortage issue. Mohammadi et al. [5] suggested that women’s empowerment should start when women are studying in university, where they need to be equipped with people and leadership skills. Therefore, a collaboration between higher education institutions and the construction industry are important to ensure that curriculum content aligns with the needs of the industry so that women can be empowered when they enter and build their career in the industry [6].

Despite the need to attract women into the construction industry and empower them in developing their careers, research in this area is still limited in the context of Indonesia. Therefore, the aim of this research is to identify strategies to empower female students to be successful professionals in the Indonesian construction industry. In order to achieve this aim, two objectives were formulated. First, this research presents the factors that can attract female students to enter the industry and satisfy their career expectations. Second, this research identifies success factors for women to progress in their careers in the Indonesian construction industry.

2. Literature review
This research adopts the women’s empowerment principles proposed by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [7] as the grand theory. This section also presents previous research on how the construction industry attempts to attract women to enter the industry and how women can build successful careers in this industry.

2.1 The grand theory: women’s empowerment principles
These women’s empowerment principles are the result of stakeholder dialogues in the European Union (EU), Canada, Japan, and the US to promote economic empowerment of women at work through responsible business conduct in G7 countries. The UN Women Report 2018 [7] supported the International Labour Organization’s (2020) five key areas where corporations can contribute to implement gender equality, including achievement of equal pay; prevention and elimination of violence and sexual harassment; developing a harmonious work-life balance; equal representation of women in business and leadership roles; and investment in a future of work that is suitable for women.

The seven women’s empowerment principles proposed in the UN Women Report [7] are summarised below:

**Principle 1: Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality**
Women hold less than 20% of board position and less than five per cent of CEO position worldwide. The firms that succeed in the global economy are those who can eliminate gender stereotypes in their workplace and ensure the equal employment opportunity for women, including on the board positions. It is important to note that women cannot be considered as a homogeneous group because they also have different backgrounds with varying identities and abilities.

**Principle 2: Fair treatment at work**
This principle is related with establishing family-friendly policies that benefit both women and the corporations. The policies allow women to continue their dual roles as family caregivers and professionals in the workplace. If women can continue their family caregiver roles, then their families’ wellbeing can be assured and women’s productivity in the workplace can also be increased.

**Principle 3: Ensure the health, safety and well-being of employees**
More than 70% of women around the world have experienced sexual harassment. The potential of sexual harassment increases in workplaces where women need to have contacts with the public, alcohol is served, non-standard working hours are used, working with people in distress, working in intimate spaces and/or private home, and working alone in remote locations.
Principle 4: *Promote education, training, and professional developments for women*

Corporations need to ensure an equal opportunity for all employees, including women. There is a need for effective training programs to empower women through education, training, networking and mentoring programs.

Principle 5: *Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women*

Negative stereotypes towards women are one of the greatest challenges for gender equality. The corporations’ advertising is a powerful driver to change perceptions and impact social norms in contemporary workplaces.

Principle 6: *Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy*

Corporations are encouraged to invest in community development programs to make valuable, effective, and responsible contributions to women’s empowerment.

Principle 7: *Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality*

There is a need for corporate transparency and accountability to implement gender equality in the workplace, marketplace and community. Measuring and reporting mechanisms to achieve gender equality are essential to monitor and track performance and progress.

2.2 The magnetism of the construction industry

Employing female professionals is a way to address the skills shortage in the construction industry. Research has shown that the increase of women’s participation in employment can increase the growth of the national economy [8]. In order to reap this benefit, policy makers should consult female professionals to develop equal opportunity policies and procedures for the construction industry. This will help in establishing strategies to attract female students studying in construction related disciplines to enter the construction industry in Indonesia.

The magnetism of the construction industry here refers to the factors that attract women to work in the industry. Gilbert and Ivancevich [9] suggested gender equality can benefit construction corporations in terms of expanding to new markets and increasing the employee’s productivity. Men and women have different ways of thinking. Therefore, the critical thinking and collaboration between the two genders can be used to develop innovative business strategies to increase competitive advantage. Fielden et al. [8] found that management training is needed to address negative attitudes towards women in the construction industry, such as gender discrimination, sexual and verbal harassment. Gill et al. [10] preferred to highlight the construction industry as a prestigious industry to build a career due to the high demand of the profession and its tendency to be well-paid. Iaili Jabar et al. [11] commented that the construction industry should actively attract and retain female professionals by highlighting the achievements of female leaders in the industry, who can be role models for other women. Malone and Issa [12] stated the construction industry can attract female professionals if the industry encourages work-life balance and recognises women’s contributions. Gokulsing and Tandrayen-Ragoobur [13] suggested that there is a need to equip female students with practical skills and the right attitudes to increase their readiness, which will allow them to better compete with male professionals in this male-dominated industry. Shortland [14] proposed a gender equal recruitment process, which is open, transparent, and objective. Baker et al. [15] found that equality and diversity are factors to attract women to work in the industry. Dericks and Phua [16] mentioned that architecture and construction management are occupationally attractive for female professionals and, as such, they should be given opportunities to enter and develop their careers in the industry.

2.3 Career success factors

Research has identified success factors and requirements that can support female students to develop successful careers in the construction industry [17]. Ellis and Heneman [18] emphasised on having an
ambition to aim for higher job positions and salary, and job satisfaction as career success factors in the industry. Judge et al. [19] stated that career success is correlated with positive psychological conditions, work-related outcomes, personal achievements and professional achievements. Rozier et al. [20] found that career success for female professionals depend on their ability to manage family responsibilities in conjunction with employment opportunities. Fernando et al. [17] identified female professionals’ characteristics, general management skills and construction industry’s supports as important factors to facilitate career success in the construction industry. Female professionals are required to shape their characteristics, such as determination, ability to analyse, presentation skills, common sense, sense of humour, and other soft skills. Female professionals are also expected to have adequate management skills, such as leadership, financial skills, and ability to manage people.

Female professionals also need supports from the construction industry, such as work flexibility, good supervisors and mentors, and ongoing training and personal development opportunities. Rosa et al. [21] suggested that the construction industry should provide personal development programs and flexible work arrangements for female professionals. To promote this, the government can develop policies for advancing female professionals’ career development in the construction industry. Wehrle et al. [22] added that female professionals in the construction industry should have a ‘can do’ attitude, a positive attitude, and an appreciative attitude. These attitudes help female professionals sustain their careers in the construction industry, rather than a self-pity attitude. Ndweni and Ozumba [23] highlighted self-confidence, female professionals’ abilities and valuable networks as career success factors in the construction industry. They explained that female leaders can become good leaders and perform well in this industry due to their attitude and skills. These female leaders can motivate their colleagues and teams to perform well since they themselves have conquered the career barriers of this male dominated work environment. They also added that female professionals have good attention to detail, negotiation skills, and emotional intelligence and are well organised.

This research advances knowledge in this area by capturing insights from female students and top female leaders in the Indonesian construction industry. Insights from female students are important to understand factors that attract them to study construction-related disciplines, while learning from the long career journeys of female leaders is valuable to develop practical strategies tailored for the Indonesian construction industry to empower female students so that they also can become successful leaders.

3. Research methodology

Qualitative methodology was adopted in this research. Flick et al. [24] stated that qualitative research facilitates better understanding of social realities by paying detailed attention on processes, meaning patterns and structural features because qualitative research can capture the feelings and thoughts of informants. This qualitative research performed through semi-structured interview sessions allowed the deep exploration of the informants’ feelings and thoughts based on their responses. Therefore, through this method, important insights can be extracted.

On the other hand, Diefenbach [25] mentioned some disadvantages of qualitative research, namely informants’ subjectivity, difficulty to generalise findings, conscious and unconscious biases, and the influences of dominant ideologies and mainstream thinking. In order to address these disadvantages, this research collected data from informants with a range of backgrounds, including female students from the public and private higher education institutions, and female leaders from state-owned, joint venture and private construction corporations.

In its efforts to empower female students to be successful construction professionals, this research is underpinned by the women’s empowerment principles [7]. Figure 1 presents the three-step research design. The first step was semi-structured interviews with female students, while the second step was semi-structured interviews with female leaders in the Indonesian construction industry. The third and final step focused on conducting thematic analyses to identify the magnetism factors of the construction industry that attract female students and leaders to the industry, and to identify the career success factors
based on the experiences of female leaders. Practical strategies can then be recommended to empower female students to be successful professionals in the construction industry in Indonesia.

**WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES**
by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
(UN Women Report, 2020)

**Research aim: Empowering women in the Indonesian construction industry**

| Data collection | Data collection | Thematic analysis |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| **Step 1**      | **Step 2**      | **Step 3**        |
| FEMALE STUDENTS | FEMALE LEADERS  | Women: Personal attitudes |
|                 |                 | Higher education institutions: |
|                 |                 | Practical learning experience |
|                 |                 | Construction industry: Work |
|                 |                 | environments |
|                 |                 | Government: Governance |

To identify factors that attract women to enter the industry and factors that support women to build successful careers

**Figure 1. Research design**

As shown in Figure 1, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups of informants. The first group consisted of 21 female students studying construction related disciplines in public and private universities. The second group was six top female leaders in the construction industry. Both groups of informants were domiciled in Jakarta Metropolitan area.

4. Research findings
This section presents the themes drawn from the thematic analysis, which highlight factors that attract female students to enter the construction industry and factors that support women’s career progression.

4.1. Practical learning experience
There is a need to embed practical content throughout the higher education learning experience in construction related disciplines so that female students have higher awareness of the construction industry and its prospects. There are four important learning activities that can be used to induce this better awareness among female students, namely, internship programs (seventh semester student – IS72; top leader – 50), visits to construction firms (fifth semester student – IS54), visits to construction sites (top leader – 50), and class discussion with experts or practitioners in the construction industry (seventh semester student – IS710).

During the interviews, the female students explained that those learning activities are valuable for them to gain new and additional knowledge about the construction industry, allowing them to understand the nature of the construction industry during their study (seventh semester student – IS72). Furthermore, the activities provide opportunities for them to gain some practical work experiences (seventh semester...
student – IS714), to practice their problem-solving skills on site (seventh semester student – IS71), and to build their networks (seventh semester student – IS71; top leader – 53). These findings align with the fourth principle in the Women’s Empowerment Framework, which is about promoting education, training, and professional development for women [7].

4.2. Recognizing the dual roles of women
The thematic analysis identifies three initiatives that can be used to improve work conditions and support women, particularly those who are married and have children, to build their careers in the construction industry.

First, flexible work arrangements seem to be a key initiative repeatedly mentioned by the informants (seventh semester students – IS79 and IS711; top leaders – 50 and 52), which is also consistent with previous study outcomes [21]. The role of women as caregivers is strongly embedded in the Indonesian culture. Therefore, having flexible work arrangements is important for women to balance their caregiving and professional roles. Some female students even expressed their desire to work in the industry from home (seventh semester students – IS72 and IS710).

Second, having a childcare facility near the workplace is an important support for female professionals. Reflecting the dual roles of women again, female professionals would like to visit her children during break times at work. They mentioned that it would be ideal if the childcare facility is in the same premises as their workplace (top leaders – 52 and 55).

Third, an informant (fifth semester student – IS53) said that the construction industry should understand that women are physically weaker than men, so this should be considered in designing jobs for women. This point may expose the lack of understanding on the student’s part concerning the work expectations as professionals in the construction industry. Construction professionals are not involved in performing physical works on site, such as pouring concrete and laying down bricks. As such, physical limitations as described by the informant should not have any role on creating better work environments for women. However, the informant might have experienced or have witnessed something in the workplace that made her raise this comment. Therefore, understanding the expectations of professionals in the construction industry is needed to attract and empower women in construction.

In summary, it is important for the construction industry to acknowledge women’ double roles – caregivers and professionals. Identifying workplace arrangements and work-life balance initiatives to support women in performing both roles effectively is an effective starting point to attract women to enter the industry and to empower them for success. This finding aligns with previous research by Rozier et al. [20] and Malone and Issa [12], and the second principle in the Women’s Empowerment Framework on fair treatment at work, including respect and support human rights and non-discrimination, by understanding the dual roles of women [7].

4.3. Gender equality in the workplace
This research also discovers the expectations of female students and professionals regarding gender equality in the construction industry. The informants pointed out three criteria that can be used to measure the level of gender equality. First, fair and transparent recruitment process and career progression (fifth semester student – IS54; top leaders – 51 and 52), which was also raised in a study by Gilbert and Ivancevich [9].

Second, having female role models in the workplace (top leader – 52), whom other women can aspire to become and who can mentor other women [11]. These two measures are also underpinned by the first principle of Women’s Empowerment Framework through establishing high-level corporate leadership for gender equality [7].

Third, no sexual and verbal harassment in the workplace (fifth semester students – IS54 and IS56; seventh semester student – IS74), which is related to the third principle of Women’s Empowerment Framework to ensure the health, safety and well-being of workers [7].

Creating gender equality in the workplace is important to demonstrate that there is a pathway for women to be leaders in the construction industry (top leader – 52); and to eliminate negative image of the industry, such as gender imbalance (seventh semester student – IS71), long work hours (seventh
semester students – IS72 and IS79) and working nights shifts (seventh semester student – IS79). These findings are consistent with the second principle of the Women’s Empowerment Framework, which is called for fair treatment at work, including respect and support human rights and non-discrimination [7].

4.4. Personal attitudes
This section was primarily derived from the insights of top female leaders. The finding reveals that although technical knowledge is important in the recruitment process and for entering the industry, certain attitudes and mindsets are crucial for female professionals to progress and succeed in their careers.

The following are attitudes and mindsets required from female students to enter the construction industry: desire to learn new things, hardworking, willingness to work on site (top leader – 50), never give up attitude (top leader – 55), and never ask for privileges just for the sake of being a woman (top leaders – 51 and 56). In the interview sessions, female leader informants seemed to appreciate female professionals who do not request privileges and are ready to fairly compete by demonstrating their best performance at work.

Besides the attitudes mentioned earlier, the female leaders explained that promotion, as in other industries, depends on work performance. Those who deliver the best results in a timely manner and are able to manage costs will be more likely to get promoted (top leaders – 50 and 56). One leader also advised that loving the job is the secret to succeed in this industry (top leader – 56). These findings are consistent with the findings from Ndweni and Ozumba [23].

There are also some soft skills that female professionals should equip themselves with, including being proactive and taking initiatives (top leaders – 50 and 51), the ability to delegate tasks to colleagues and subordinates, problem solving skills (top leader – 50), the ability to work as a team (top leader – 51), and communication skills (top leaders – 51 and 55). The importance of soft skills is also highlighted by Fernando et al. [17].

5. Conclusion
This research contributes to knowledge and practice by identifying factors that attract female students studying construction-related disciplines to enter the construction industry and factors that support women’s career progression in the sector. To attract female students to work in the construction industry, there is a need for female students to have practical learning experience during their tertiary education. Embedding practical content into construction curriculum and demonstrating the application of theories in practice are a way to increase awareness. Internships and networking opportunities with industry practitioners are other valued learning experiences. The construction industry also has an important role to attract women into the industry and empower them so they can have successful careers. The industry should recognise the dual roles of women as caregivers and professionals. Flexible work arrangements and providing childcare facilities are examples of strategy that demonstrate the recognition of these dual roles. The industry should also increase gender equality by giving opportunities for women to be recruited and promoted, by having female role models, and by eliminating sexual and verbal harassments. Essentially, the industry must demonstrate that there is a pathway for women to build successful careers.

Besides these external factors, there are internal factors that women themselves should nurture so they can build successful careers in the construction industry. Attitudes, such as willingness to work on site, desiring to learn new things and loving the job, are key. Indeed, the industry needs to have a transparent process in recruiting and promoting people, but at the same time, women should also demonstrate a high level of work performance to be promoted. Women should also strive to develop essential skills, including being proactive, delegating, problem solving, teamwork, communication skills, and leadership.

Finally, it is important to consider the role of the government, which has not been discussed previously in this paper. The government can contribute by creating effective governance to support and guide the efforts to empower women in the construction industry. Practically, the government can do so
by establishing policies, regulations, guidelines, and incentives to promote and encourage the implementation of women’s empowerment principles and initiatives. Future research can develop a governance operational mechanism to empower women in the Indonesian construction industry.

As such, this research advocates that empowering women in the construction sector requires the contributions from various stakeholders, including higher education institutions, the construction industry, the government, and female professionals themselves.

Based on the insights captured from female students and female leaders, this research proposes guidelines to empower women in the Indonesian construction industry, which can be considered as a practical extension to the existing four principles of the Women’s Empowerment Framework by UN Women Report (2018) as follows:

**Principle 1: Establishing high-level corporate leadership for gender equality**
The construction industry is encouraged to implement gender equality initiatives in the workplace through fair and transparent recruitment process and career progression to ensure equal employment opportunity for women. Also, having female role models is important to demonstrate that the industry supports gender equality.

**Principle 2: Fair treatment at work, including respect and support human rights and non-discrimination**
The construction industry should recognise the dual roles of women as caregivers and professionals. Organising flexible work arrangements and providing childcare facilities are initiatives that can be used for this purpose. Implementing these initiatives to recognise women’s dual roles demonstrates the industry’s commitment to provide gender-equal workplace, which is a good starting point to change the male-dominated image of the industry.

**Principle 3: Ensure the health, safety and well-being of workers**
The construction industry must have a clear policy to prevent sexual and verbal harassments at the workplace. Female professionals in this industry are encouraged to stay silent or ignore verbal harassments, particularly from male workers and colleagues, in the workplace. Female professionals are expected to understand that verbal harassment is a common practice in male-dominated work environments. Most of the time the industry blames women when they experience verbal harassments in the workplace. Therefore, this industry must have and enforce policies and regulations against sexual and verbal harassments at the workplace to ensure the health, safety and well-being female professionals.

**Principle 4: Promoting education, training, and professional development for women**
This research found that the construction industry must collaborate with higher education institutions to implement this principle in practice. Promoting education for women in this industry should start before they enter the construction industry. Collaboration between the industry and the university through internship programs, visiting construction firms, visiting construction sites, and class discussion with the experts are examples of initiative to prepare female students and empower them to be successful professionals in this industry.

This collaboration will be beneficial for all parties, including the construction industry, higher education institution and female students. The industry will gain qualified female students who are well equipped for the industry and understand the expectations of the industry. The university will be able to develop curricula that support the industry’s demand and can attract more female students into construction related disciplines. Female students will be empowered early before entering the industry and be ready to compete in this male-dominating work environment to slowly change the culture of the industry.

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