Who's building New Zealand?

Women in construction

Call to mind a construction industry worker, and you’ll probably imagine a male. But adjust your thinking, as women are increasingly participating in construction work in New Zealand.

AS IN OTHER Western countries, women make up a very small percentage of New Zealanders working in the construction industry. They comprise only 17% of the built environment workforce compared to 47% across all jobs.

Push to build numbers

At apprentice training organisation BCITO, only 2.6% of apprentices are females, but research is being carried out to understand how to attract, retain and promote women to take up an apprenticeship.

This study makes good sense at a time when the construction industry is struggling to fill positions in the current building boom.

Donna Howell is President of the local branch of the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), an international organisation that supports women in the industry. First established in Texas in 1953, NAWIC set up in New Zealand in 1996 and runs an annual awards event as well as photographic exhibition.

While the 17% female participation figure might seem low, Donna says this is double what it was 15 years ago. She’d like to see more women in prominent positions, however.

‘While it is fantastic to see increasing numbers of women choosing a career in construction, this isn’t reflected in the participation of women at a decision-making level in construction,’ she says.

Depth of talent clear

The NAWIC awards, however, demonstrate the depth of female talent in the industry.

A good organiser

Gillian Linton of Arvida, winner of the Apprentice and Student Award in the professional category, is an example. She chose the industry as a career that plays to her strengths in organising and managing.

‘I also wanted a practical career, so when I was looking for a degree and came across Massey University Bachelor of Construction, majoring in construction management, I thought that would be a good fit’, she says.

At Arvida, much of her work is organisational, dealing with procurement and tendering, contracts, programmes and variations.

‘As a mature student, I love to learn, and being on site surrounded by all sorts of different people with different skills and experience is fantastic.

‘I’m amazed at how fast you slot in and become a valuable team member who adds value. Part of that relies on your own willingness to jump right in and become involved!’

Gillian says, that as the industry is flourishing, challenges are minimal. ‘Jobs are there for whoever wants them. Before I had finished my first year of study, I was employed and moved on to my second job 18 months later. Employers seem to be keen across the board to support study, and everybody I know works with companies who facilitate that.’

She believes educators have a role in encouraging more females into the industry.

‘Within schools, there still seems to be a bit of stereotyping. Most of the females in my degree have been encouraged by their parents that this is a good career option rather than careers personnel at schools making the suggestion.

‘That’s a shame, as I don’t feel there are barriers to entry. You can move up the ranks fast if you are capable, keen and interested. Compared to many degrees, you come out already employed and with the expected forward workload that looks to continue.’

As to low female participation, she believes the construction industry’s risk-averse nature is a reason. ‘Change is viewed as risk by many people.’

‘The Gateway programmes that are in some schools should be in all schools and females encouraged at that level. If girls had any idea how much they could earn in the trades or the professional side of the industry, there’d be much higher uptake.’
Interestingly, when she tells people about her job, it’s not men who are surprised. ‘Construction is not a career that immediately springs to mind for most women, and I have noticed more shock from fellow women at my choice than from men.’

Encouraging and mentoring
Laura Clifford has seen positive changes in her 8 years at Hawkins Construction where she works in a range of roles including safety and in collaborative partnerships with local iwi.

While admitting there are challenges operating in a male-dominated industry, she says that, over 8 years, the industry has improved significantly. ‘It’s now accepted practice for a women-only toilet on sites, clothing and footwear fit better and men are accepting that women can provide value.’

She sees a growth in prospects for women. ‘It is great to see Ngāi Tahu and the Ara Institute providing opportunities for female leaders in their community and encouraging them into leadership roles across the construction industry through programmes like He Toki ki te Rika and the Group Apprenticeship Trust, He Toki ki te Mahi.’

The breadth of industry roles opens the way for more females. ‘We need to start in the schools and promote construction as a worthwhile pathway for young women and get rid of the old stereotypes. ‘The industry should be more flexible and family friendly, valuing the contribution of women and ensuring that we develop the knowledge and experience that they bring.’

The presence of females on site has a further advantage. ‘Women bring a softer side to the construction industry. They can help curb the language used, reduce aggression and often they work harder as they have to prove themselves. My own daughter is now working in the industry and I have encouraged her into an industry, with opportunity and a strong future.’

Leading educator
Ideally, women will be encouraged to consider a career in construction while at school. One leading academic who epitomises a successful woman in construction is Professor Robyn Phipps from Massey University’s School of Engineering and Advanced Technology.

An architect before moving to academia to fulfil a passion for researching healthy and sustainable buildings, Robyn is a Co-Director of the Healthy Housing Research Group which won the Prime Ministers Science Team Prize in 2014.

NAWIC winners
Winners of the third annual Hays National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) Excellence Awards were recently announced.

The NAWIC awards honour the achievements women are making in New Zealand’s construction industry. With the industry growing at 10% yearly to 2019 and 52,000 more construction related workers overall required within 5 years, it makes sense to encourage more women to work in construction.

- Rachael Rush of Klein won the Professional Woman of the Year Award for her commitment to outstanding healthcare design combined with leadership.
- Verena Maeder from Solid Earth took out Tradeswoman of the Year for her cutting-edge approach to leading the only commercial earthbuilding yard in New Zealand.
- Sian France of Beca won the Outstanding Achievement in Design Award implementing a major design change that achieved a positive environmental outcome and significant cost savings for the project.
- Laura Clifford of Hawkins Construction won the Helen Tippett Award for actively promoting the participation of women in construction.
- Steph McLeod of Stantec NZ and Vikki Stephens of Beca were joint winners of the new Rising Star Award that celebrates future leaders in construction.
- The Excellence in Construction Services Award went to Sophie Lackey of Leighs Construction.
- Gillian Linton of Arvida won the Apprentice and Student Award in the professional category for her commitment as an assistant construction project manager while studying towards a Bachelor of Construction.
- Emily Sutton of City Care won the Apprentice and Student Award, trades category, for her outstanding work as an apprentice digger operator.

For more... A complete list of award winners is available at www.nawic.co.nz.