

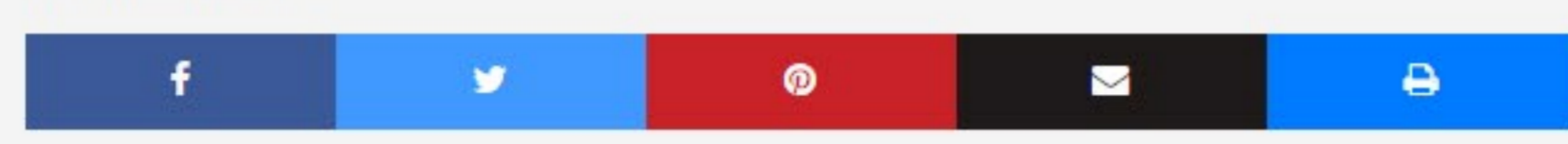
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OPINION & ANALYSIS

# BONGANI DLADLA | Women in hard hats should not be a novelty

Only 12% of engineers in SA are women, which must be the result of something more complex than skills

19 September 2021 - 18:48  
BY BONGANI DLADLA



**BUILT FOR THIS** Women in construction should be the norm.  
Image: 123rf

In 2021, unconscious bias and inherent patriarchal structures still remain huge barriers for women entering traditionally male-dominated fields. Despite our modern times, outdated perceptions persist, not just in the minds of men in the workplace, but even for those women seeking to climb the career ladder. What will it take to transform these inhibiting thought processes and drive true transformation in these sectors?

Working in the construction industry, I have seen how the culture of an organisation or industry can be a huge barrier to entry, discouraging those from participating. "The boys' club" and the "construction fraternity" are dangerous terms still used today. We need to pay more attention to how we speak and act, foster a welcoming environment.

Women can succeed in the construction industry and there are business opportunities for those who are determined. So that women make up just 12% of engineers in SA and are still vastly underrepresented in the construction workforce, must come down to something more complex than skills and business opportunities.

What is the solution? There is no silver bullet, but experience has shown me there are some steps industry stakeholders can take to promote the gender agenda. The first is quite obvious.

**Promote**

We need to promote examples of women in the industry, demonstrating the achievements of those bold enough to try. For the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), in practical terms, this has culminated in the Empowerment and Recognition of Women in Construction (ERWIC) Awards, now in its second year. These awards encourage excellence among women and commitment among stakeholders to support women in their professional growth and development. The number and calibre of entries we received have confirmed what we have been suspecting for some time – the construction sector is no longer "a man's world".

**Mentor**

A strong driver for creating the ERWIC Awards was the need to recognise the necessity of mentors and role models in the industry. Only 30% of CIDB-registered companies are women-owned and they are awarded just 23% of public sector projects. The awards highlight the women who have supported and continue to support other women working within the construction industry, who have contributed to nurturing talent in a way that has helped others grow and mature within their fields. Encouraging mentorship and promoting role models is vital for gender mainstreaming within construction.

**Deliver**

Being historically marginalised, women have to adopt excellence as their status quo when entering the construction industry. Excellence in project delivery is a prominent consideration for the awards and promotes strong ethics, professionalism and commitment. These characteristics are important for all individuals who wish to succeed in the construction industry, regardless of gender. However, by shining a light on women who exemplify these characteristics, we hope to signal to the industry that this high standard needs to be upheld by all entities to foster a growing industry that is attractive to people wishing to start businesses in the construction realm.

**Enable**

We need to create an enabling environment for women – we need policies that drive gender empowerment practices. This is necessary in the private and public sectors, though I believe government can lead by example. Our state must be deliberate in its support for women through targeted policies that guide clients with infrastructure budgets. Emerging enterprises should also be guided on how to be inclusive in their growth. Without a strong supportive policy framework, gender empowerment can only move at a slow pace. We need policies that create impact.

We need to see a culture shift and a change in perception in the construction sector. The CIDB is encouraging all stakeholders within state entities and the private sector to embrace gender diversity and transformation within their organisations. By fostering an encouraging and welcoming working environment, we hope to progress the industry forward in the gender mainstreaming initiative and, one day, see a woman in a hard hat as part of the norm and not someone who is "overcoming gender stereotypes".

*Bongani Dladla is acting CEO, Construction Industry Development Board*

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