



PAVING THE WAY

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Construction is one of the most male-dominated industries, but women are slowly staking their claim. *SALIFE* listened in on a conversation between five women who have all experienced the challenges and benefits their gender faces.



IF I HAD KNOWN WHAT THIS INDUSTRY COULD OFFER ME AT HIGH SCHOOL, I WOULD HAVE JUMPED STRAIGHT INTO IT, STRAIGHT AWAY.

Above: Laura Cornthwaite hadn't initially considered a job in the industry, but since finding her place at Badge Constructions, she says she wishes she'd pursued it earlier. **Opposite page:** Melisha Wellington says there's a lingering assumption men hold all the senior positions, but has found a supportive workplace that aligns with her values at Sarah Construction. **Previous pages:** Olivia Petrobon from Fulton Hogan was one of only three students in her all-girls school maths class, and says women have to build the confidence to take a step into unknown territory.

Finding a solution

One of the biggest issues that needs to be solved is the retention of women in the industry – on average, they tend to stay for only six years. Melisha says there's still a cultural norm that women are the primary caregivers, and there needs to be a shift in that thinking. "Until we can provide better support frameworks in our workplaces and everyone's behind that, I don't think it'll be easy to keep women in the workforce. There needs to be flexibility for both parents, men need to be able to be at home more too."

Melisha, the winner of the 2018 Master Builders HiViz Outstanding Woman in Construction award, says the key is for women to align themselves with leaders in their company who are open to diversity and actively support it. "Adrian Esplin, CEO of Sarah, is on the property council for diversity. He's very supportive and he does happen to have two daughters, which helps. He wants to see a future for them, but hopefully men who don't have daughters can be open in their thinking and carry that change through if they're in leadership roles."

This thinking is increasingly becoming accepted. Marie has been able to reach the lofty heights of her career because her husband took on a part time role at work, or stayed at home, while their three children were young. Carly has seen it

at Alexander Symonds with a senior surveyor working part time to accommodate his wife in a senior medical role. She says the flexibility is win-win. "With the things that are happening at the moment with gender equity and construction, the businesses that aren't really being mindful and taking this on are going to suffer in the long term, because they are going to lose these people. As we provide more awareness through committees and groups and events, people start to realise how fantastic they could have it."

Marie is in agreement: "It works both ways, you need to put your hand up and put yourself forward, which I know can be difficult for some women. You have to be with the right employer who gives you that opportunity and supports you. And when you do hit a ceiling, you just work around it. If you look at the research, it shows that women, not just in our industry, but in all industries, don't necessarily get the opportunities for promotion, and wages across the board are lower. But I think as individuals, if you're prepared to put yourself out there and find a company that fits with you culturally, there are great opportunities. The barriers are definitely there, but the opportunities are also there, it's how you pursue them."



UNTIL WE CAN PROVIDE BETTER SUPPORT FRAMEWORKS IN OUR WORKPLACES AND EVERYONE'S BEHIND THAT, I DON'T THINK IT'LL BE EASY TO KEEP WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE.

Right: Carly Zanini from Alexander Symonds is involved in a number of groups to promote women in the industry, including the National Association of Women in Construction SA Chapter.

Scope of roles

Women can enter the construction industry with a view to becoming a project manager, a tradesperson, an engineer, a CEO – or new roles probably haven't even been created yet.

Marie says there's a perception in construction that if you train to be an electrician, you're destined to be an electrician. Or if you become a plumber, that's what you'll be for life. In reality, there are different roles to discover at different stages of a career.

"Something we don't tend to promote well in construction is how diverse the roles are. There is just so much scope and so much complexity in building major structures, like the Darlington Interchange. It's an amazing logistical piece of construction using so many different skills. You can start as a tradesperson and go into management, education, into national or international organisations across multiple parts of the industry."

Sometimes the construction industry isn't even the original goal, but the opportunities are there to fall into. This was the case for Carly Zanini, business relationship manager at Alexander Symonds. Carly studied interior architecture, but has now ended up in a completely different field. "For me to be hired by a surveying company – not as a surveyor – because they're looking to see how they can broaden what they do and reach their full capabilities as a business is really interesting," Carly says. "Exposure of these careers to kids is going to help young people see the potential of careers in construction, which I think is not so much highlighted at the moment."

Shifting the culture

There's no doubt the industry is opening up and catering to a female workforce, but the statistics don't lie. Only about three per cent of those in trades are female, and the number rises only slightly to 12 per cent across all roles in the industry.

There are paths being forged every day, but there is still certainly room to grow. Too often, women on sites are presumed to be admin staff, no matter their seniority. As in most industries, there are issues surrounding the support of women, who are often the primary caregivers for children.

Almost on a daily basis, Melisha Willington says people outside the business, such as subcontractors, automatically defer to the male in the room. Melisha, project manager at Sarah Constructions, is currently working on Lot Fourteen on the old RAH site and says some people still have that lingering mentality that men are the only ones to hold senior positions. "One of my first projects in commercial, my manager put me on site as a bit of a learning curve, which it certainly was. I thoroughly enjoyed it, but there were also certain situations that I will never forget because it was blatant sexism."

All women in the conversation said they have aligned themselves with an organisation that has similar values, but the difficulty could be going into an environment outside of the office.

Laura says the older generation of tradesmen will often question her, but the issue is quite easily resolved. "Sometimes they think you don't know what you're doing. I think once you talk to them and they can see you do, within 30 seconds, it's over."

Marie says the "blokey" culture is shifting as the industry

WITH GENDER EQUITY AND CONSTRUCTION, THE BUSINESSES THAT AREN'T REALLY BEING MINDFUL AND TAKING THIS ON ARE GOING TO SUFFER IN THE LONG TERM.



WOMEN DO SUCCEED VERY WELL WHEN THEY DO GET INTO CONSTRUCTION AND THEY CAN HAVE FANTASTIC OPPORTUNITIES AND CAREERS.



Above: Marie Paterson, CEO of the Construction Industry Training Board, recognises unconscious bias as one of the major hurdles for women in the construction industry.

moves along. "People who have been in the industry a long time have been more tolerant. Perhaps 20 or 30 years ago, you'd say, 'This is what I have to deal with so I'll just put up with it'. People in their early 20s are saying, 'I'm not putting up with that'. Women do succeed very well when they do get into construction and they can have fantastic opportunities and careers, it's just the challenges of getting there in the first instance."

Upon entry

Hard hats and steel-capped boots aren't traditionally the uniform little girls dream of wearing to work. Careers such as nursing and teaching have typically had their doors wide open to females, with family members and educators encouraging the pathways most walked by women.

But the scope for working in the construction industry is expanding and it's no longer rare to find women on sites or in leadership positions. Laura Cornthwaite, project coordinator at Badge Construction, wasn't aware of the opportunity that awaited her. "If I had known what this industry could offer me at high school, I would have jumped straight into it, straight away," she says. "It wasn't until I got to Badge and got to work in different areas that I fell in love with it. I thought, 'How did I not know about this in year 12?'"

Laura never felt encouraged to pursue subjects aimed at a job in the trades, but she approached Badge anyway, with her fingers crossed. "The first job I applied for at Badge, I didn't get. I didn't have the qualifications, but I still thought it would be good to put myself out there. Two weeks later they called me to say they'd

created a role for me. My mantra throughout my career has been to put my hand up and get involved as much as I possibly can."

Laura is now the project coordinator in charge of the development of the Port Canal Shopping Centre.

The support given to girls wanting to enter the industry is paramount to their success. Olivia Pietrobon, a graduate engineer at Fulton Hogan, had the backing of her family, who came from a background in construction. The vote of confidence was strong at home, and although her schooling certainly didn't discourage it, she went to an all-girls school with only three students in her maths class. Olivia went on to study civil engineering and is currently working on building an access track next to a pipeline at Myponga.

At the forefront of aiding those who want to enter the construction industry is Marie Paterson, CEO of the Construction Industry Training Board. Marie says there are multiple challenges for women in particular, and at the root of so many of those hurdles is the unconscious bias we have when it comes to stereotypes. "It relates to women and men," Marie says. "We really need to understand how that affects our decision-making when it comes to recruiting people. I've met some fantastic employers since I've been in this role who are really mindful of that and are breaking these barriers down. It happens one organisation at a time, one boss at a time, one manager at a time. It's about being mindful that those unconscious biases actually do exist and being cognisant of it and making change because of it. That's something we need to continue to do a lot more of. When I work with people who really do understand that, it really changes their workforce." 🌱

BUILDING THE FUTURE

A case for diversity

"Diverse thinking is a good thing. It enables change and innovation."

Melisha Willington

"Diversity breeds innovation, collaboration, different ideas, different concepts. Changing the way we do things is so important, it's the way the world works."

Carly Zanini

"A smart business place will realise there's 50 per cent of an untapped market out there in women."

Melisha Willington



Carly Zanini



Marie Paterson

All about confidence

"I had to learn it's okay to speak up and it's okay if you say things that are wrong. You have to have that confidence and take the first step."

Olivia Pietrobon

"To actually go out and network when you're in a room full of people that you don't know who they are, you can be really intimidated by it. The only way to do it, is to do it. You have to take the leap of faith and have a conversation with someone. The more you do it, the easier it gets. It's amazing what you learn and the people you meet in the process."

Marie Paterson

Someone to look up to

"I've never had an official mentor in my career, but I've had many mentors over my career and I look back at all those people and they've had a significant impact on my career progression so I think that can't be undervalued."

Marie Paterson

"I was a mentor this year for the UniSA bachelor of interior architecture fourth year group. Throughout your career you have unofficial mentors and it's great to actually have a set mentor, where you meet every two months and see where that goes. I think it's really important to do that, and to make yourself available as a mentor."

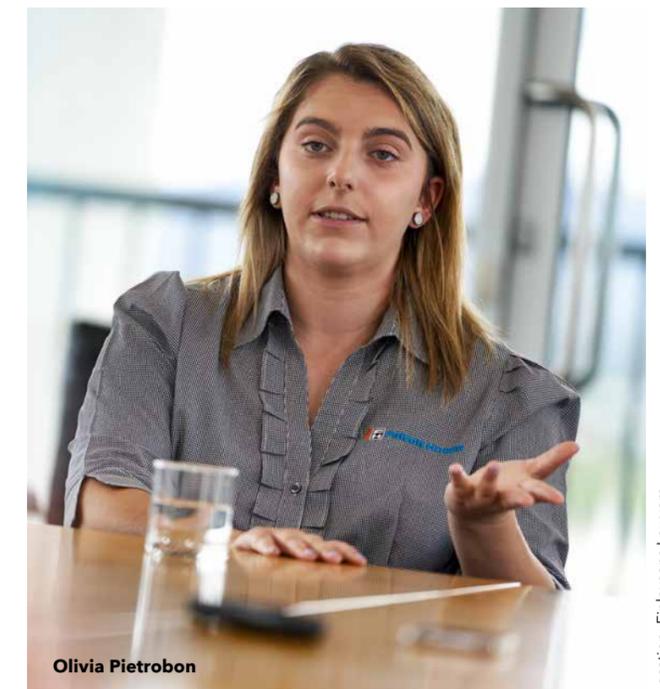
Carly Zanini

"As part of the graduate program for Fulton Hogan, we get assigned a mentor. I've found it really helpful. We talk about what I'd like to achieve in the next month."

Olivia Pietrobon

"If there's a success story of a woman doing well at a company, it encourages others. We have a female who's been at Badge for 20 years, and women at the company can look up to her. It makes my life a little bit easier because she's already paved the way. They can see the success of her career and that helps."

Laura Cornthwaite



Olivia Pietrobon

Location: Finlaysons Lawyers