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## **A Grounded Theory Exploration of Workplace Culture and Mentorship: Advancing Women’s Career Growth and Retention in Construction**

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This study investigates the nuanced challenges and opportunities for women in the construction industry through qualitative methods based on inductive reasoning, focusing on the influences of workplace culture and mentorship on their career progression and retention. By analyzing qualitative data gathered from interviews with twelve women across various industry roles, the research identifies both entrenched systemic barriers—such as male-dominated workplace cultures and uneven career advancement opportunities—and emerging positive dynamics like generational shifts in attitudes and the adoption of supportive technologies. From these observations, the Practical Advancement and Support Framework for Women in Construction (PASFWC) was developed. This framework outlines strategic interventions, including the implementation of robust mentorship programs, equitable career progression processes, and flexible work environments, aimed at creating a better work environment for women and helping contractors utilize the uniqueness of women to widen their productivity and economic growth. The findings suggest that while substantial barriers remain, strategic interventions tailored to the needs of women can facilitate considerable progress. Further research is suggested to empirically test the framework and validate its effectiveness across different contexts within the industry.

**Keywords:** Women in construction; Organizational change; Gender barriers in construction; workplace culture; Grounded theory framework; Female careers construction

### **Introduction**

Historically, industries such as construction and engineering have been strongholds of male dominance, with societal expectations and systemic barriers frequently sidelining women. Despite ongoing efforts and recognition of the issue, women remain significantly underrepresented, prompting questions about the persistent gender disparity in such critical sectors. Research suggests that strategic interventions at national, organizational, union, and client levels can effectively counteract these biases and promote gender balance (Afolabi, Oyeyipo, Ojelabi, & Patience, 2019). Yet, the construction industry, a cornerstone of economic growth and infrastructure development, continues to lag in achieving gender parity.

As of 2023, women accounted for just 11% of the construction workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024), a figure that highlights not only an imbalance but also an untapped potential in addressing the industry's critical labor shortages, which demand an influx of approximately 240,000 new workers annually due to an aging workforce (Sadeh et al., 2024). Integrating more women into the construction sector could mitigate these challenges while fostering diversity and innovation. Women bring unique perspectives, skills, and strengths that are essential for enhancing project outcomes and organizational performance, potentially transforming the industry (Bazarbayeva, 2024). Systemic issues have historically conditioned gender equality at work, with established policies failing to significantly alter the narrative, as women's participation remains underrepresented (Wang, Mussi & Sunindijo, 2021). Despite a gradual increase in female participation, the continuous barriers and differential treatment they encounter underscore the urgent need for substantial change towards true gender balance in the construction field.

This study seeks to address these challenges by focusing on the specific needs and experiences of women in the construction industry. The central research question, "How do workplace culture and mentorship impact the career advancement and retention of women in the construction industry?" aims to dissect these influences to provide constructive recommendations. The research will identify the primary barriers to women's participation and progression and propose practical, actionable strategies that construction firms can implement to enhance their workforce utilization. Building on existing research, this study will utilize qualitative data from industry interviews to develop a framework that supports the advancement of women in this field and will help the construction industry maximize its labor potential and adapt to changing market needs.

### **Background**

The construction industry has long grappled with persistent challenges in achieving gender equality, reflecting systemic disparities that extend beyond workforce dynamics to broader societal issues. At the heart of this discussion lies the male-dominated culture that characterizes the industry, as highlighted by Wang et al. (2021). Despite policies aimed at promoting inclusivity, their limited impact underscores deeply rooted power dynamics that influence how women are perceived and treated within the sector. This entrenched culture is further exacerbated by management structures and work environments that significantly impede women's participation and advancement (Pamidimukkala et al., 2022). A male-centric employment model—rewarding continuous, full-time engagement—disproportionately disadvantages women, particularly those balancing professional and familial responsibilities (Tapia et al., 2020).

The systemic nature of these challenges often manifests in extended work hours, discrimination, and social isolation, deterring women from pursuing long-term careers in construction (Rosa et al., 2017; Dainty, Neale, & Bagilhole, 2000). Occupational segregation remains a persistent issue, with women frequently confined to non-technical roles or positions with limited upward mobility. Araya (2021) observed that this segregation not only deepens gender inequality but also exacerbates the industry's skilled labor shortage, thereby hindering overall efficiency. Low enrollment rates of women in construction management programs further narrow the pipeline of qualified female professionals. Integrating more women into the workforce, however, offers significant benefits, including diverse skills and perspectives that can drive innovation and productivity (Hegewisch & O'Farrell, 2015). Rosa et al. (2017) supported this assertion, revealing that gender-balanced workforces often achieve higher productivity levels.

Despite these potential benefits, challenges such as work-life balance, stress, and negative perceptions continue to deter women from entering or persisting in the field. Kumar and Chaturvedi (2018) highlighted how the demanding work environment and traditional gender roles amplify the conflict between professional and personal responsibilities for women. These challenges are compounded by a lack of flexible work options, which often relegates women to non-technical or part-time roles, limiting career growth opportunities (Shibani et al., 2021). Addressing these systemic issues requires organizational changes, including the adoption of family-friendly policies and flexible work arrangements.

Furthermore, the perception of female identity within the construction industry often serves as a barrier to inclusion. Afolabi et al. (2017) argued that women represent an untapped resource for economic growth, yet their contributions are underutilized due to discrimination, sexual harassment, and gender pay gaps. Women frequently feel compelled to over-prepare and exceed expectations to counteract their marginalized status (Rosa et al., 2017). Cultural attitudes and biases remain significant barriers, as evidenced by Norberg and Johansson (2020), who found that discriminatory practices and gender-biased expectations create an unwelcoming environment for women. These challenges persist despite decades of policy interventions, with issues such as intraorganizational injustice, harassment, and unequal pay continuing to hinder progress.

Mentorship and role models have been identified as critical to addressing these barriers. Rosa et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of mentorship in providing guidance, fostering confidence, and facilitating access to professional networks. Afolabi et al. (2019) added that a culture of mutual support among women can empower individuals and encourage younger generations to pursue construction-related careers. However, merely increasing female representation without addressing systemic issues may reinforce negative stereotypes, as warned by English and Hay (2015). Effective integration strategies must therefore focus on recruitment, retention, and support systems.

Lastly, patriarchal norms and societal expectations impose a double burden on women, complicating their navigation of professional and familial obligations. Kumar and Chaturvedi (2018) and Adeniji et al. (2022) noted that traditional gender roles, coupled with the demanding work environment, create significant work-life conflicts for women. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive training and development programs that incorporate gender-sensitive approaches, as advocated by Bazarbayeva (2024). Only through such structural and cultural changes can the construction industry foster a truly inclusive environment for women, enabling them to thrive and contribute to the sector's growth and innovation.

### **Methodology**

The study utilizes qualitative research methods based on Grounded Theory, as articulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This approach was instrumental in designing semi-structured interview questions directly tied to the main research question, which seeks to explore how workplace culture and mentorship influence the career advancement and retention of women in the construction industry. A strategically diverse group of 12 women was selected to participate to capture a wide range of perspectives within the industry. This group included women working for large and small contractors, holding various positions such as field craftsmen, office staff, and those in managerial roles, along with two women from academia, each contributing various levels of experience. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and over the phone. While recordings were made to maintain the accuracy of the data, some participants opted out of this aspect of the process. The goal was to reach a saturation point where additional interviews would not yield new information. The transcripts of these interviews were

then analyzed using the techniques of open, axial, and selective coding. These steps are essential components of Grounded Theory and were employed to systematically uncover themes and patterns that respond to the research question. In addition to exploring these themes, the study was structured to achieve two key outputs: the development of a theoretical framework and the creation of a practical roadmap for contractors. The theoretical framework, titled the Practical Advancement and Support Framework for Women in Construction (PASFWC), was derived from the data to provide a structured understanding of the factors influencing women's experiences in the construction industry. This framework aims to guide future research and inform policy and practice within the field. Simultaneously, a roadmap was developed to translate the theoretical insights into actionable steps that construction firms can implement. This roadmap is designed to guide contractors in supporting and enhancing the career progression and retention of women within their organizations by addressing key areas such as mentorship, workplace culture, and career development opportunities. Table 1 shows the background of the participants in this study.

**Table 1.** Background of Respondent

<b>Role</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>
Assistant PM	Bachelor's degree	General Contractor	6
Assistant PM	Bachelor's degree	Specialty Contractor	7.5
Professor/Superintendent	Master's degree	University	12
Architect	Bachelor's degree	Architectural Firm	33
Professor	Ph.D.	University	14
Assistant PM	Bachelor's degree	General Contractor	10
Assistant PM	Bachelor's degree	General Contractor	5
Director	Bachelor's degree	Construction Management	26
Painter	Bachelor's degree	Self-Employed	30
Superintendent	Bachelor's degree	General Contractor	10
Assistant PM	Bachelor's degree	Construction Management	7
Project Manager	Bachelor's degree	Specialty Contractor	6

## Results and Discussion

The analysis of interviews revealed significant findings regarding women's experiences, which show persistent challenges and emerging opportunities. This section synthesizes the primary premises drawn from the grounded theory analysis as follows:

**Premise 1: Workplace Culture and Gender Dynamics:** The construction industry remains characterized by a predominantly male-dominated culture, where women often face the enduring "boys' club" mentality. This cultural backdrop is particularly prevalent among older men, who were frequently mentioned as a group that struggles to adapt to the presence of women in leadership or technical roles. While some respondents acknowledged instances of respect and acceptance, others highlighted the ongoing biases that persist in the field. "There are older men that do have a hard time seeing a woman enter the field... but as a woman, you are most of the time applauded to be in the

field,” remarked one participant. This dichotomy highlights the complex dynamics women navigate in these settings.

**Premise 2: Mentorship and Support Systems:** Mentorship emerged as a pivotal element for career development, with many women emphasizing its importance in navigating the construction industry, and a crucial element for professional growth. Respondents who had access to mentors—whether through structured programs or informal networks—experienced significant positive impacts. "Having a mentor who understands the ropes and can guide you through the male-dominated environment is invaluable," one interviewee emphasized. Yet, there exists a notable gap in gender-specific mentorship programs, which are crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by women. This would also help with the retention of women, as another participant noted, "... would help seeing people maybe stick around for longer."

**Premise 3: Career Advancement and Leadership Opportunities:** Unequal access to career progression remains a pressing concern. Respondents highlighted the limited representation of women in senior roles, noting that resistance from older male colleagues often contributes to this disparity. They expressed a desire for increased female representation, not only in typical roles but specifically in leadership positions. As one participant noted, "Seeing more women in higher positions would be inspiring... it would help change mindsets." Such representation not only provides role models but also signals that the industry values diversity and inclusion. Assumptions about women's home-life responsibilities further influence hiring and promotion decisions, thereby hindering equal opportunities. One participant stated, "We can't expect men who have been in this industry for forty years to completely change their views overnight... but we need to assert ourselves and demand respect."

**Premise 4: Work-Life Balance and Family Responsibilities:** Work-life balance presents a significant challenge in the construction industry due to demanding schedules and long hours. Respondents emphasized the importance of flexible work policies and maternity leave; however, these supports were often exacerbated by being inconsistently applied or inadequate. Positive examples were cited, where companies promoted well-being and remote work options, enabling better management of personal and professional responsibilities. Participants noted the positive impact of companies that actively implement supportive practices. "My company's effort to support women through flexible working conditions has significantly improved my job satisfaction and commitment" (Participant 7). However, experiences vary significantly by location and organization, which suggests a need for more standardized supportive measures across the industry.

**Premise 5: The Role of Emerging Technologies and Trends:** Although no specific technology was identified as uniquely beneficial to women, tools that support remote work and continuous learning were acknowledged as helpful. The use of these technologies can provide the flexibility needed for women to balance career demands with personal responsibilities. "Remote work technologies have allowed me more flexibility to manage both my professional and personal life effectively," shared Participant 9. Social media was also cited as a powerful tool for displaying successful women in the field and altering perceptions. "Social media could have a huge presence in women in construction... Being able to show a woman overseeing a huge commercial project could inspire many," another participant noted.

**Premise 6: Challenges Unique to Women:** Unique challenges, such as increased scrutiny and the constant need to prove one's competence, were commonly reported. Women often felt that their contributions were overlooked or undervalued, and pay disparities reinforced these issues. "We deal

with all these men, and we deal with hundreds of millions of dollars, so we need to be respected like everyone else.” One of the most frequently cited obstacles was pay disparity, with women receiving lower compensation for similar roles and responsibilities. This financial inequity has a significant impact on career satisfaction and retention, creating a barrier for women seeking long-term careers in construction., as another participant noted, “Even when initiating projects, I find myself being paid less than my male counterparts for the same work.” The additional pressure of having to build credibility in a male-dominated environment further compounded these challenges.

**Premise 7: Resilience and Empowerment Amid Challenges:** Despite numerous obstacles, many women report an intense sense of empowerment derived from overcoming industry barriers. "The challenges are there but overcoming them has made me realize my strength and value in this industry," expressed Participant 12. This resilience is an indication of the potential for transformative change within the industry, driven by women who are challenging and reshaping the traditional norms. In addition, many women report finding great satisfaction and enjoyment in their construction careers, supported by a solid foundation of skills and personal relationships.

The findings from the interviews provide unambiguous evidence of how workplace culture and mentorship influence the career advancement and retention of women in the construction industry. The identified premises—ranging from cultural challenges, mentorship gaps, unequal career progression, work-life balance, and the role of emerging technologies—shed light on the barriers and opportunities that women experience. These themes align directly with the central research question by illustrating the systemic cultural and structural factors that impact women’s professional growth and long-term participation in the industry.

*Proposed Theory: The Practical Advancement and Support Framework for Women in Construction (PASFWC)*

Building on these premises, the Practical Advancement and Support Framework for Women in Construction (PASFWC) was developed to offer actionable solutions. The framework consolidates these insights into targeted interventions aimed at transforming workplace culture and enhancing mentorship opportunities, thereby addressing the core issues affecting women’s career advancement and retention. This theory posits that fostering a supportive environment for women requires addressing deeply embedded cultural norms, providing robust mentorship and support systems, ensuring fair career advancement opportunities, promoting work-life balance, integrating emerging technologies, and recognizing unique challenges. This theory emphasizes that while significant obstacles exist, the resilience and empowerment demonstrated by women in the field can catalyze transformative change when paired with strategic industry efforts.

**The Core Components of the Theory:** To cultivate an inclusive environment in the construction industry, targeted training and initiatives are vital. These efforts should bridge generational gaps and promote practices that recognize and value women's contributions. Specifically, training programs should address discriminatory practices and unconscious biases among male employees to challenge entrenched "boys' club" mentalities and foster a culture of mutual respect. Cultivating respect and acceptance through dialogue and proactive leadership is fundamental to fostering a transformative workplace culture. Establishing mentorship programs that connect women with supportive allies is crucial, as these initiatives address unique challenges and support professional growth. Allies, regardless of gender, enhance these programs by providing diverse perspectives and helping to break down barriers. Clear criteria for promotion and career advancement, along with regular policy reviews, ensure a fair and unbiased work culture. Comprehensive work-life balance policies and

support for flexible working conditions are essential to improve job satisfaction and retention among women. Investments in technologies that facilitate remote work, and online training can also enhance flexibility and inclusivity. The strategic use of social media to highlight women's achievements helps shift public perceptions and emphasizes their role in the industry. Regular pay audits and transparent compensation policies are necessary to ensure equity. Recognition programs that celebrate women's contributions can foster a supportive culture where resilience and perseverance are rewarded, facilitating career growth for women in construction. To validate the Practical Advancement and Support Framework for Women in Construction (PASFWC), we propose the following hypotheses, as illustrated in the mind map in Figure 1. Each hypothesis is based on identified premises and can be empirically evaluated through quantitative methods such as surveys, longitudinal studies, and data analytics.

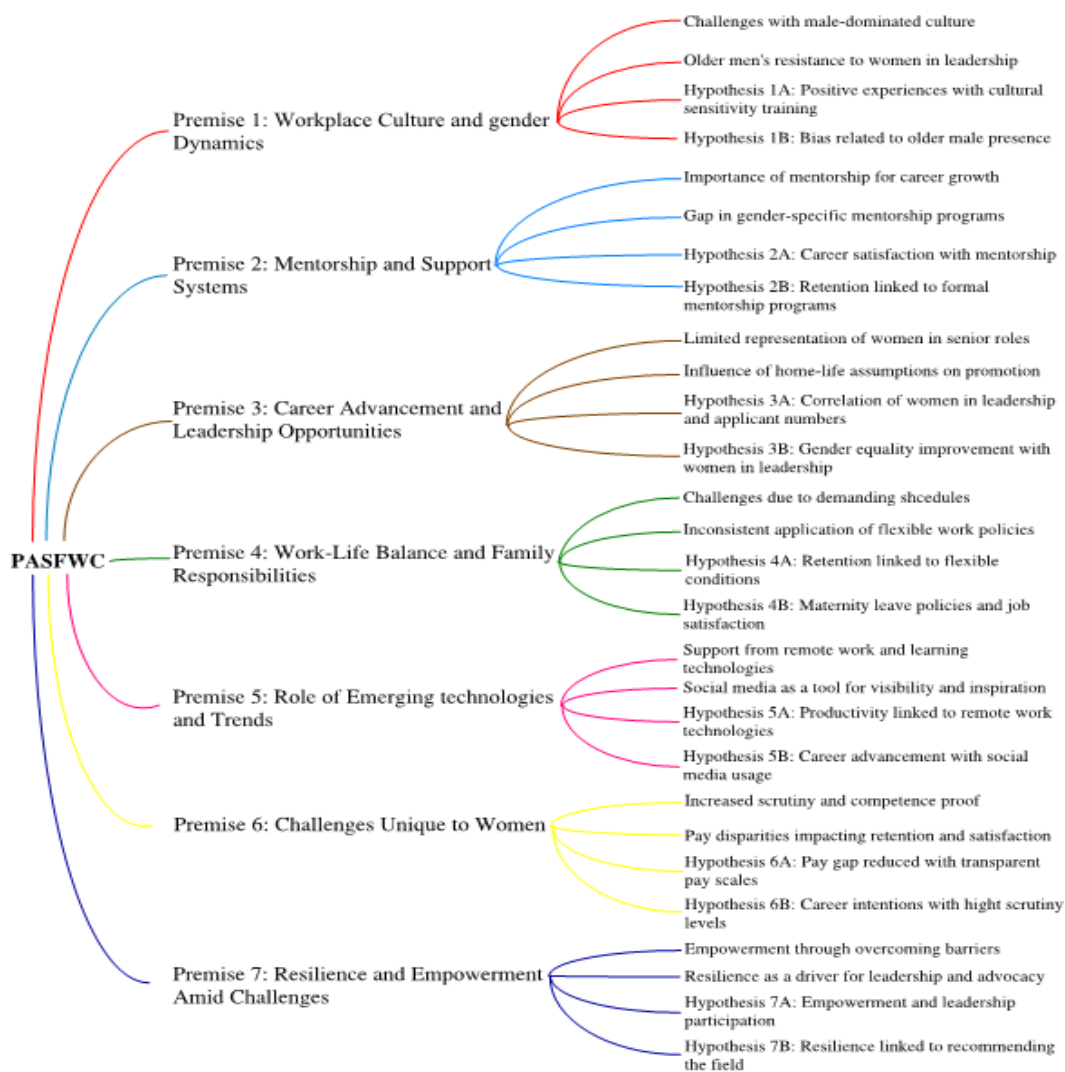


Figure 1. Mind Map PASFWC

*Strategic Roadmap for the Implementation of PASFWC*

Implementing the Practical Advancement and Support Framework for Women in Construction (PASFWC) requires a structured approach to create a supportive environment tailored to the specific needs of women. We have developed a comprehensive roadmap designed to enhance career advancement, retention, and job satisfaction for women in the industry. This roadmap details actionable steps that construction contractors can adopt to ensure the framework is thoroughly integrated into their operations. These steps are outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Strategic Roadmap for the Implementation of PASFWC

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Strategic Actions</b>
<b>1. Assessment and Benchmarking</b>	Establish a baseline understanding of current workplace culture and policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conduct surveys to assess workplace culture and gender diversity.</li> <li>- Perform a gender pay audit.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Policy Development and Implementation</b>	Formulate and implement supportive gender equality policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop gender-neutral hiring and promotion policies.</li> <li>- Initiate structured mentorship programs.</li> <li>- Establish supportive work-life balance policies.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Training and Development</b>	Enhance awareness and skills across the organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Implement sensitivity and inclusion training.</li> <li>- Provide leadership training for women.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Technology Integration</b>	Utilize technology to support flexible working conditions and visibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conduct technology workshops for flexible work arrangements.</li> <li>- Adopt remote working tools.</li> <li>- Use social media to highlight women's achievements and company commitments.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback</b>	Continuously assess and refine the framework's implementation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Define and monitor KPIs related to diversity goals.</li> <li>- Conduct annual reviews of policies and culture.</li> <li>- Establish feedback loops with employees.</li> </ul>
<b>6. Advocacy and Community Building</b>	Build a supportive network and engage with industry groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create internal networks for women.</li> <li>- Engage with external industry groups for broader advocacy.</li> </ul>
<b>7. Expansion and Scaling</b>	Expand and adapt successful initiatives based on feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scale up successful mentorship and training programs.</li> <li>- Refine policies based on feedback and industry developments.</li> </ul>



The synthesis of these findings with the literature reveals the complex and multifaceted challenges women face in the construction industry. While there is a consistent narrative about the barriers due to a male-dominated work environment, the results suggest gradual changes with generational shifts in attitudes and the increasing implementation of technology that supports flexible work environments. Moreover, while the literature extensively discusses the systemic barriers and their negative impacts on women's careers, the authors, drawing on their own industry experience, acknowledge that some progress has been made. This is corroborated by the empirical findings from the interviews, which offer a glimpse of positive changes and adaptations that could be effectively harnessed to promote gender inclusivity. The discrepancies and alignments between the literature and the empirical findings enrich the discussion about gender dynamics in the construction industry, pointing to both persistent challenges and emerging opportunities for women.

### Conclusion

This study highlights the persistent challenges and emerging opportunities for women in the construction industry, focusing on how workplace culture and mentorship shape their career advancement and retention. The findings emphasize entrenched barriers, such as discriminatory practices, the "boys' club" mentality, and limited options for work-life balance, which continue to hinder women's participation and progression. Simultaneously, the study identifies opportunities for improvement, including supportive mentorship, flexible work policies, and cultural shifts. The Practical Advancement and Support Framework for Women in Construction (PASFWC) was developed to directly address the central research question: *How do workplace culture and mentorship impact the career advancement and retention of women in the construction industry?* Grounded in qualitative findings, the PASFWC outlines actionable strategies to tackle cultural and structural barriers, including mentorship programs, transparent promotion policies, and work-life balance initiatives. These measures aim to create a workplace environment that fosters inclusion, enhances retention, and supports women's professional growth. While the framework provides a theoretically grounded and practical response to these challenges, one limitation of the study is its reliance on a sample of 12 participants, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across regions or organizational types. However, theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring the findings are robust. Future research should select samples from firms of various sizes and locations to compare results with those of this study. Additionally, future research should validate the PASFWC using quantitative methods, test the developed hypotheses, and explore its economic implications through cost-benefit analyses. This study contributes to the field by translating qualitative insights into a structured framework that addresses systemic barriers and fosters career advancement. It also enriches the broader discourse on inclusivity in male-dominated industries, displaying women's resilience and potential. The PASFWC, while conceptual, serves as a foundation for practical change, inviting further exploration to refine and implement its components effectively.

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