

Challenges facing women-owned professional practices in the Built Environment

Abstract

Women in the Built Environment are underrepresented as professionals, senior leaders and as entrepreneurs. There is plentiful research on challenges encountered by women contractors in the construction industry, however there is minimal research on barriers and constraints encountered by women entrepreneurs registered as professionals in the Built Environment. This study examined the challenges affecting women-owned professional consulting firms in the South African Built Environment. Data was collected from twenty-five purposively selected women entrepreneurs using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data. The findings of this research showed that women-owned professional consulting firms encounter multiple challenges and barriers though with different intensities. The leading barriers among these are the lack of effective legislation and policy to enforce gender inclusive procurement. Other challenges include limited access to start-up capital, payment delays, limited access to infrastructure projects, restricted access to the market and lack of business training and business coaching and mentorship. The study recommends for existing legislation to be reviewed and amended to advance the economic empowerment of women-owned businesses operating in the Built Environment. In addition, it is crucial for the CBE in partnership with the private sector, Construction Industry Development Board (cidb) and the Department of Small Businesses and Development to develop an integrated strategy to support the diversification of women-owned businesses in the Built Environment.

Introduction

Previous research has shown that women in the Built Environment are underrepresented as women-owned enterprises and in professional and leadership roles (Hasan, 2021; Naoum, et al., 2020). Women account for more than 50% of the South African population; however, the professional registration statistics indicate that only 13% of professionals registered with the Councils for the Built Environment Professions (CBEP) by the end of 2020/21 were women (CBE, 2022). In addition, data shows that only between 1% and 6% of this expenditure ends up with women-owned businesses, despite women representing more than half of the South African population (Mastercard, 2020). Furthermore, there is plentiful research on women contractors in the construction industry, however, there is minimal research on challenges faced by women businesses in the South African

Built Environment. Research on women-owned businesses in the built environment is important as it will assist the CBE to build an empirical basis to develop programmes to empower women in the built environment professions. This study aims to address this gap.

The rationale of this research is to examine the motivators, challenges and support required for women's entrepreneurial success in the South African built environment sector. This will be addressed by exploring the following objectives:

- a) To identify the characteristics and attributes of women-owned business owners involved in the Built Environment sector.
- b) To assess the motivators that drive women business owners to establish Built Environment companies.

- c) To identify challenges experienced by women-owned businesses in the Built Environment.
- d) To determine support structures/systems that contribute to the success of companies of women-owned businesses in the Built Environment.
- e) To provide recommendations that can be adopted to enhance the participation of women-owned businesses in the Built Environment.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the experiences and challenges faced by women business owners in the built environment professions. This approach was chosen to gather in-depth insights and understanding of the participants' perspectives, which are crucial for addressing issues related to gender equality and empowerment in this sector. Sampling techniques were used to identify women entrepreneurs in the Built Environment. The study included 25 semi-structured interviews. This sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, where no new themes or insights were emerging from additional interviews. Conducting 25 interviews allowed for a comprehensive exploration of individual experiences while maintaining a manageable scope for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Research Findings

The findings of the current study indicate that most of the women business owners in the Built Environment are between the ages of 30-39 years. This research finding corroborates with previous literature that most entrepreneurs are young and vibrant, and they fall within the ages of 35 and 45 years (Xavier, Ahmed, Nor and Yusof, 2012). The study found that all women business owners sampled are running professional consulting firms. A key feature of the research findings is that most women-owned businesses are newly established. The data shows that 47% of the women-owned businesses sampled in this study have been operating for 6-9 years, 24% of the businesses have been operating for 10 years and above, 18% of businesses have been operating for 1-2 years and 12% have been operating for 3-5 years.

This study reveals that women business owners in the Built Environment share certain characteristics and attributes. All women business owners sampled in this study have Built Environment qualifications, had worked in the Built Environment sector for eight years and above prior to venturing into entrepreneurship and were all registered with either the architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, quantity surveying and project and construction management and town planning

professions. Additionally, this study highlights that women business owners possessed multiple entrepreneurial skills and attributes such as ambition, high levels of energy, self-belief in their technical and management skills, stakeholder relations skills and perseverance. These research findings are in concert previous literature which postulates that leadership, problem solving, self-confidence, and stakeholder management skills are critical for women to survive and thrive in the construction industry (Anuar, Abas, Ibrahim and Hamzah, 2017).

Several factors motivate women business owners to pursue entrepreneurship in the Built Environment sector, these motivations include desire for financial independence, identified business opportunity in the market, desire for a challenge, personal growth and independence, desire to attain work-life harmony, aspirations to create employment opportunities to eradicate poverty in the community and encouragement from employers, family members, and peers. These findings also corroborate with previous scholarship which identified the need to attain financial independence and the desire to empower themselves and communities as primary motivators for women business owners in the construction industry in South Africa (Aneke et al, 2021; Sospeter, 2016).

The research findings also reveal that the entrepreneurial skills least possessed by women business owners in the Built Environment sector include business management skills, strategic management, risk-taking, brand development and marketing. These findings are also in concert with previous studies conducted in Malaysia and South Africa which found that the entrepreneurial skills least possessed by women entrepreneurs in construction include strategic management and planning procedures, marketing strategies, resource management and risk management (Xavier, Ahmed, Nor and Yusof, 2012; Chimucheka and Magadla, 2021). Furthermore, the study also found that women-owned professional practices in the Built Environment sector encounter multiple challenges though with different intensities. The leading challenges among these are the lack of mechanisms (policy and legislation) to implement gender-inclusive procurement, lack of access to startup capital, difficulties in sourcing clients, payment delays which resulted in the lack of cash flow.

The study also highlighted that most women-owned professional practices encounter high levels of sexual harassment, gender discrimination, health, and safety hazards on construction sites. A key finding is that most white women-owned business owners sampled in this study did not experience challenges such as the lack of access to credit/funding and cash flow during the startup phase of their business. Moreover, women-owned professional practices lack the experience and expertise to compete with experienced enterprises owned by their male counterparts. As a result,

women-owned businesses struggle to penetrate the market. Women business owners in this study reported that they require structured business training and business mentorship and access to funding to sustain their businesses.

Recommendations

The CBE in partnership with the National Department of Public Works and Infrastructure to advocate for existing legislation on procurement processes to be reviewed and where appropriate be amended to strengthen promotion of women-owned businesses through public procurement policies and processes. The CBE in partnership with the voluntary associations, private sector, cidb and the Department of Small Businesses and Development to develop an integrated strategy to support the diversification of women-owned businesses in the Built Environment.

The CBE, in partnership with voluntary associations and the private sector, to establish a supportive network that connects all women business owners across the various disciplines and promotes knowledge sharing and establish a one-stop resource where women-owned business can obtain information and gain access to information on enterprise development and management, funding and career development opportunities, mentorship, coaching and sponsorship. This network will also play a critical role in lobbying government to increase the participation of women-owned businesses in the country's procurement realm.

Conclusion

The study explored a previously neglected research area on women-owned businesses in the Built Environment sector. Women-owned businesses are becoming an important contributor to economic development and their role becomes more critical in improving the financial situation of developing countries. Therefore, this study determined the characteristics, factors that motivate, and challenges faced by women-owned professional practices and support required for women's entrepreneurial success in the Built Environment sector. The major challenges faced by women-owned professional practices include the lack of access to startup capital, payment delays, limited access to infrastructure projects which result in the lack of cash flow in their businesses, restricted access to the market and the lack of business training and business mentorship.

The research findings revealed that the current economic, legal and policy frameworks of the country do not promote and support gender-based procurement. For instance, the tendering system requires budgets and company experience that women businesses do not have, and these place women-owned professional practices on the back foot. Additionally, women-owned professional

practices encounter high incidents of sexual harassment and gender discrimination, health and safety hazards on construction site and lack of access to business networks. Therefore, it is important for the CBE to work collaboratively with government, industry leaders and relevant stakeholders to develop an integrated strategy and programmes to support women-owned professional practices operating in the Built Environment.

Areas of Future Research

Exploring the barriers women face in accessing startup capital and funding and developing strategies to improve financial support mechanisms for women entrepreneurs in the Built Environment.

Investigating the effectiveness and implementation of policies that promote gender-inclusive procurement processes, and how these can be improved to better support women-owned businesses in the Built Environment.

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