With the International Women’s Day in mind, two of our UNSW Education Fellows sat down to talk about the issues that women face in the construction industry.

Scientia Education Academy Fellow and Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of the Built Environment, Dr Benson Lim, has focussed his research on women working in the construction industry, both as tradeswomen and as professionals. The outcomes inform some of our Construction Management teaching programs. He was interviewed about his research by fellow Scientia Education Academy Fellow, Associate Professor Cathy Sherry, UNSW Law, who has recently been awarded ‘Academic of the Year’, at the 2017 Women in Law Awards. The awards, organised by Lawyers Weekly, recognise the achievements of women who have challenged, influenced or changed the practice law in Australia. Cathy is a leading Australian expert on strata and community title, whose book, *Strata Title Property Rights: Private governance of multi-owned properties* (Routledge, 2017) explores the legal regimes that regulate most large-scale property development in Australia.

**Cathy:** What prompted you to research women in the construction industry?

**Benson:** We have had a collective effort in Construction Management and Property to increase female student admission, and to look after women students’ intellectual and social well-being. At Faculty level, Built Environment has placed a strong emphasis on gender equity and multi-culturalism since 2016.

**Cathy:** What did the research project on early career women in construction focus on?

**Benson:** This research, conducted by Dr Bee Oo, Ms Siyu Feng and myself, focussed on identifying the career choice factors, job expectations and barriers faced by early career women in the construction industry. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to female graduates in Construction Management (CM) programs from
the past 5 years between 2012 and 2016, and 30 early career women responded to the survey.

Cathy: What did the research find?

Benson: Interestingly, we found that there are three key factors to women developing an interest in a career in construction: construction management education, recruitment campaigns and career expos. However, what drives women to actually join the industry is the better pay and career opportunities that the industry offers, in comparison to other industries. Also, the women most likely to join the industry have high levels of self-confidence.

Cathy: What about the negatives?

Benson: The greatest challenges are a stressful working environment, a lack of informal networks and the existing masculine culture. If we are going to assist women in these industries, it helps to know what barriers they face and how those barriers might be best overcome.

Cathy: And what about the research on tradeswomen? How do they differ from other women in the construction industry?

Benson: This was explored through the research done with Xiaoyun Liu and Dr Bee Oo. Our specific objectives were to determine the major types of trades and businesses of tradeswomen; to examine the factors influencing tradeswomen’s career choice; to explore the barriers faced by tradeswomen; and to address their overall job satisfaction. Most tradeswomen are electricians and carpenters, but overall, tradeswomen are very under-represented in the industry, particularly in manual jobs.

Cathy: What did you find out about the tradeswomen who have made it into the industry?

Benson: Their motivations for joining the industry are different to women in professional roles. Tradeswomen are driven by a desire to acquire new skills, complete challenging tasks, and obtain self-achievement and satisfaction. Freedom and flexibility were also factors that attracted women to the industry, both of which can be beneficial for women with family responsibilities.

Cathy: What kind of challenges do tradeswomen face?

Benson: Masculine culture, discrimination in employment, harassment at workplace, and limited apprenticeship opportunity are all a problem. Also, things like companies not having Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that fits women. They need access to properly fitting PPE and some employers adopted a one-size-fit-all policy. We found that job satisfaction of tradeswomen is positively correlated with their annual income, but not their demographic characteristics (e.g. age, working hours per week, year of experience in trades, and trade union membership).

Cathy: Moving forward, what can we do to increase the number of women in the construction industry and to ensure their success?

Benson: We think that giving female students greater exposure to the task variety and work environment in construction, through workshops and networking events, could increase the number of women in construction. We also believe that mentoring has a very significant role to play in women’s success in the industry. Indeed, since 2016, we have been quite active in organising and conducting workshops for highschoolers and our students. Particularly, through the assistance of our female graduates, we strived to reach out to those girls’ high schools, inviting students to our workshops. During these workshops, our alumni and staff members were invited to share their experience about different career paths and expectations in the industry.

Added to this, we recognise that active collaboration between the industry and academia is the key mechanism towards attracting and retaining more women in the construction industry. We are currently working on a mentoring initiative in our CM program, which will be launched in the second half of 2018, whereby our alumni will be invited to
be mentors to students. As part of the mentoring initiative, students will go through peer-group and individual mentoring, and will have a chance to attend workplaces for a day in a semester to see what the industry is like. There is research that suggests that mixed-mentoring - male and female mentors and mentees – promotes mutual respect between men and in women in the industry. Indeed, in our CM program, we have established and maintained a family-like culture - our graduates are very happy to offer advice and assistance to current students.

Update - 20 August 2018

Benson’s result summary poster ‘Tradeswomen Findings’ can be viewed here.

If you would like to find out more about these pieces of research, get in touch with us via pvce.events@unsw.edu.au.

To learn more about our Fellows and the Scientia Education Academy, visit the website: teaching.unsw.edu.au/scientia-education-academy-teachers.

This year's theme for the International Women's Day is #PressForProgress

See other related UNSW initiatives at iwd.unsw.edu.au