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Proceedings Paper:

Bull, M. and Aderiye, Y.O. (2020) Gender and leadership in FM : a view from the top. In: The proceedings of the 19th EuroFM Research Symposium 2020, European Facility Management Network. EuroFM Research Symposium 2020, 03-04 Jun 2020, Online conference. European Facility Management Network (EuroFM).

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Bull, M. and Aderiye, Y.O. (2020) Gender and Leadership in FM: A view from the top. The proceedings of the 19th EuroFM Research Symposium 2020, European Facility Management Network, 3-5 June 2020, online conference.

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Gender and Leadership in FM: A view from the top

Melanie Bull¹ and Yetunde Oluwatoyin Aderiye²

ABSTRACT

Background and aim: Leadership and gender is often an emotive subject with each gender picking sides to support their view of what should be obtainable in their industry, and proffering reasons for perceived advancement or a lack thereof. The service industry and facilities management is not exempt from this practice; therefore the aim of this study is to understand the perception of women in leadership positions in facilities management and the enablers and barriers to their career progression; and also the potential impact of mentoring early career females in the industry.

Methods /methodology: We adopted an interpretivist and inductive approach through qualitative emailed survey questions to 12 participants. The participants were all mid to senior level female professionals from the facilities management sector.

Results: The results evidenced the need for a more focused recruitment and development pathway for women starting in FM and also in terms of career progression. There was a need to be resilient as a woman in the industry, but to remain empathic, and authentic in their leadership. The use of mentoring for early career women new into the industry was seen as important but also to continue that mentoring through mid-career to help break the glass ceiling in organisations, and to ensure the mentoring taken was positive, and provided ongoing support for development. Finally, the other way women built their own self-esteem and earned respect within the industry was through gaining academic and professional qualifications.

Originality/value: While there are several studies on gender and leadership, this study focuses on the service industry with an emphasis on Facilities Management and the use of mentoring to support women in overcoming the issues that arise as a result of their gender.

Practical or social implications: The reality of where women are in the service industry, especially facilities management is different from the perception of stakeholders; both external and internal. Emphasis should be made to celebrate the achievements that could attract and retain qualified experts regardless of gender.

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Keywords (4-7 key words): Facilities Management, Gender, Leadership, Service Industry, Mentoring

Type of paper: Research paper

INTRODUCTION

Facilities management (FM) is a fast growing and rapidly evolving field which has seen exponential growth even though it is still emerging (Shah, 2006, Li et al, 2019). It has professionals from various sectors and generations and boasts a wide range of skills and competencies (Dettwiler et al, 2009), representing the gamut of working professional types. This is also reflected in the gender equation to some extent. What it has in seemingly short supply, however, are women in leadership roles. "Leadership has been predominantly a male prerogative in corporate, political, military, and other sectors of society. Although women have gained increased access to supervisory and middle management positions, they remain quite rare as elite leaders and top executives" (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p.573). This is as true today as it was in 2002. The Alexander - Hampton Review (2019) made recommendations in their report in 2016 to increase the number of women in leadership positions to 33% by end of 2020, which aligns with the UK Government approach. The FTSE 100 has seen an increase of women in the 'Combined Executive Committee with Direct Reports' figures, increasing by 1.6% to 28.6% in the past year, however this falls short of the target, meaning FTSE 100 companies will not achieve the overall target by end of 2020 'unless the appointment rate of women is near to 50%' (Alexander-Hampton Review, 2019, p8). In terms of country performance comparison in the FTSE 100 companies, France, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, Finland and Italy have exceeded the 33% target, however the UK is just short on 32.4% although this has improved by 4.7% since 2017.

In a general sense and not just in facilities management, whilst there has been some improvement, there appears to be little impact made by women in the male-dominated world of 'senior positions in corporate leadership' (Klettner et.al, 2016, p.397). On examination of the Alexander-Hampton Review data (2019) there does seem to be a lower level of women at board level in construction and real estate companies. This exists despite the advances made for equality in issues such as gender pay (Topping, 2020), and the decisions to impose quotas on the number of women on corporate boards by some advanced countries (Seierstad, 2017); an interesting development which began in Norway and has also been implemented in France. These measures have had seemingly little effect on the number of women in CEO positions in healthcare management in the USA, which is currently rated as 12th in the overall FTSE 100 'Women on Boards' figures in 2019, with only 28.2% (Alexander-Hampton Review, 2019). Athey (2014) discussed in her paper that despite progress, inequalities still existed in American Healthcare Leadership. The American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) survey, which has been in existence since 1990 evidenced that in the survey of 2012 there was still a 20% gender salary gap, and this had increased 2% from the first survey in 1990. Of the participants there were 22% male and only 11% of female respondents reporting as CEOs. This figure appears to have had little change since the first survey in 1990 where 28% male and 11% of female respondents reported as CEOs. This evidenced that there has been no obvious narrowing in the gender gap of senior management in organisations, but this might be more evident in a male-dominated sector like facilities management (Athey, 2014). 2017 saw the number of women recorded as leading Fortune 500 companies at 6.4%, however in 2018 the number fell to 4.8%. McKinsey's report on 'Women in the Workplace, 2018' found a concerning trend in that for every 100 men that are promoted there are 79 women, and only 60 women from an ethnic background. Their report consolidated that men

hold 62% of manager positions whilst women only 38% (Stedman, 2019). Stedman (2019, p1) also focused on the fields of construction, manufacturing and engineering stating that the number of female engineers has *“more than doubled since the 1980s”* and that the National Association of Women in Construction had seen an increase in female employment. However, there is not the same level of promotion of women in these industries. As a leader in recruitment, Stedman suggested that professionals with mentors are more likely to advance more quickly than those without.

In terms of female leadership there is a growing body of literature on how mentoring can influence the achievement of women to more senior positions. A study in South Africa (Scheepers et al, 2018:466) focused on sponsorship mentoring as *“a talent management intervention for female leaders aspiring to senior levels”*. Their research found that there was less issue with young white women, but there was still a barrier to senior leadership for women over fifty and also women of *“African, Coloured or Indian ethnicity (ACI)”*. Through the literature on gender and mentoring it is evident that the engagement with mentoring offered to women, or even the desire to be mentored has varied (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014; Tolar, 2012; Dreher and Ash, 1990). However, Chisolm-Burns et al (2017) advocate the benefits of balance in having female leaders, but also that *“women must act as their own advocates by seeking out networks, sponsors and mentors” (p.321)*.

Research aim and objectives

The aim of this study is to understand the perception of women in leadership positions in facilities management and the enablers and barriers to their career progression, and also the potential impact of mentoring early career females in the industry. The objectives of the research were to:

- Understand the perceptions of female leaders in the industry in terms of entrance to the FM industry and their perception of gender within it.
- Understand the enablers and barriers to career progression for women in the FM industry.
- Explore the perceptions on the benefits of mentoring for women in the FM industry.
- Propose solutions for engaging more women at leadership levels within facilities management.

LITERATURE STUDY

There is a world of difference between expectations of equality in the workplace and the reality, because of the gender pay gap Topping states women ‘work for free’ for the first two months of the year on average (Topping, 2020). It does appear there is no regulatory effectiveness where policies have been put in place (Klettner et. al., 2016), and the Facilities Management industry may not be exempt from this skewed statistic. This difference is even more evident at leadership levels, where the goal of having 33% of Board members as women has failed to materialize (Goodley, 2020). One of the ways to achieve this, will be to have women already at senior level positions mentor other women on their way up the career ladder. Earl (2019) reviewed women in leadership in FM as part of an MBA dissertation and she discussed that in a 2017 Central Bank study, women held 16% of CEO jobs in Ireland and 26% of Board seats, however on reviewing the top 12 FM companies in Ireland she found only 21% of senior leadership positions were held by women. Female leaders in the FM industry in the UK came together for international women’s day and their discussion focused on the growth of women entering the profession (Facilities News, 2019); but there is still a gap at Board level. Facilities News (2018) ran an article on ‘How can we encourage more women into leadership positions in the FM industry’ and one of their key messages, to enable progression, was to find

mentoring networks within FM but also to look for female role models and mentors outside of the industry.

Mentoring comes in different forms with the main two being developmental mentoring, focused more on the relationship and development of skills (Garvey, 2014), and also sponsorship mentoring which is the sponsorship of a protégé, aimed to raise their organisational profile as well as learning from a more experienced mentor (Merrick, 2017). There has been a focus in research on the concept of sponsorship mentoring and gender and the evidence of barriers in terms of gender and mentoring. Abbott (2018) discussed sponsorship mentoring as being increasingly helpful for women and minorities to reach leadership positions in law firms. Helms et al (2016) found that sponsorship helped enable women to further their careers. Sandberg (2013) also reflected that employees with sponsors are more likely to ask for a pay rise, irrelevant of gender; whilst Groysberg and Bell (2013) stated that sponsorship of women can help to reduce the 'old boys club' in corporate America. However, Meyers (2015) noted that men can feel uncomfortable with sponsorship or mentoring younger women because of what their colleagues 'might think'! Czerniawska and Guzman (2016: 39) argued in terms of gender in sponsoring in consultancy firms that if women are in a male dominated organisation that it may be more useful to have a male sponsor to better understand the organisational politics. They did state that the sponsor needs to understand the woman's position in her career and also to deliver *"concrete suggestions about what to do, who to get to know and how to put yourself forward"*.

The unique attributes of the facilities manager might also be a contributory factor. A typically unstructured role heavily dependent on the support requirements of the organisation, coupled with flexible and often long hours might not be traditionally compatible with women who are often still caregivers in different forms outside of work. This should not prevent career progression or mentoring. As Ehrich (2008) and Singh et al (2002) note mentoring relationships are important for women at all stages of their career cycles, and even after having families and returning to work part time, this needs to be addressed to encourage continued personal and professional development. There is also recognition that the mentoring provides knowledge which is important for promotional opportunities (Durbin, 2011). Does this mean they are less inclined to venture into the field, or are less likely to be selected for available roles? Where they have been offered and accepted facilities management roles, is there any motivation to aspire to senior management roles or is it the case of an invisible ceiling within organisations? Bull's (2019) research on women in leadership did include interviews with some senior female facilities managers who referred to the "male dominated boardroom" which blocked access to women. This in turn had an impact on their motivation as they could not further their careers in these organisations. It evidenced people with vast experience moving away from organisations that had the old fashioned "boys clubs" to more progressive organisations; and for some, to completely different industries as they didn't see a progression route in the FM industry.

There is evidence there are few women in leadership positions and relatively no change in these statistics from the last decade (Athey, 2014; Seierstad, 2017, Stedman, 2019; Given the male dominance of the facilities management field, this research will investigate the perceptions of women in leadership within the FM industry.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses an interpretivist and inductive approach, which allowed the voices of the participants to showcase their own perceptions of their engagement with the FM industry and the authors interpretation of these views through a reflective and reflexive process (Dowling, 2006). The research focused on trying to gather shared meanings using a social constructionist lens (Berger and Luckman, 1991). The research was carried out using an adapted qualitative research strategy as identified by Mason and Ide (2014) to move into the 21st century and create alternative means for collecting qualitative data. Due to the nature of the participants and to be able to draw on a broader UK and Ireland perspective, this method involved emailing the participant, who were originally selected due to their seniority in the industry, to invite them to participate in the research and secondly to gain consent. Approximately 30 requests were sent out with 12 confirming their participation. This followed with the emailed qualitative survey questions. The participants were also invited to give an insight into their work history with most of them attaching their CVs to the responses. The qualitative survey questions (as highlighted below) asked them to explore their own engagement within the FM industry.

1. Tell us about your career history (length of time in organisations, how you entered FM, timelines and significant events in terms of your career/career progression)
2. Do you feel there is a gender difference in the FM industry? (If yes or no, please explain why you think this)
3. Do you think there is a need, as a woman, to change your behaviour to advance to a leadership role in the FM industry? (If yes or no, please explain why you think this)
4. How would you encourage women into FM as a profession?
5. How would you encourage women to aspire to a leadership role in FM?
6. What has helped or hindered your career?
7. Have you ever had a coach or mentor, and if you have what were the perceived/tangible benefits?

The questions included asking them about their own experiences and for stories about their own careers including their own enablers and barriers. The female participants also shared their career histories through their CVs or written career history, helping the authors to understand the background and historical context of the participants. The purposive data sample (Saunders et al, 2016) was based on 12 women working in a cross section of middle to senior management in facilities management, in both the public (5) and private sector (7). The names of the participants have been removed for anonymity, but Table 1 offers a brief overview of their length of career in FM, type of organisation, seniority level and approximate age.

Table 1 Participant Overview – UK and Ireland.

Participant	Length of career in FM	Current Organisation	Management level	Age Range
Participant 1	8 years	FM Company	Middle Management	30-39
Participant 2	11 years	NHS	Middle Management	30-39
Participant 3	26 years	FM Company	Senior Management/ Board Level	50-59

Participant 4	26 years	NHS	Senior Management	50-59
Participant 5	21 years	Consultancy	Owner and MD	60-69
Participant 6	30 years	FM Company	Senior Management/ Board Level	50-59
Participant 7	14 years	Consultancy	Owner and MD	50-59
Participant 8	24 years	Private Sector	Senior Management	40- 49
Participant 9	23 years	Education sector	Middle Management	50-59
Participant 10	26 years	FM company	Senior Management/ Board Level	50-59
Participant 11	11 years	Local Government	Middle Management	50-59
Participant 12	10 years	Education sector	Middle Management	30-39

In terms of data analysis, a thematic approach was taken (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and thematic analysis was used to discover any patterns in the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This involved coding the data and the development of a thematic map (Gray, 2018). As Clarke and Braun (2017:297) discussed the focus of thematic analysis is to *“identify and interpret key, but not necessarily all, features of the data guided by the research question”* but noting that the research question can evolve through the theme development. The key themes were generated and a further check through the data was carried out to review the creation of the themes. *“A theme captures something important within the data in relation to the research and presents a level of pattered response of meaning in the data”* (Gray, 2018:692). As interpretivist, inductive researchers, the results were determined by the social actors’ words as opposed to pre-assumed outcomes (Blaikie, 2010; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

RESULTS

The discussion below follows three key themes that were identified from the data using the thematic analysis method (Clarke & Braun, 2017). These themes are highlighted below and discussed in turn:

- Theme 1: Perceptions of gender difference in the FM Industry
- Theme 2: Overcoming the hurdles (from entrance to career progression)
- Theme 3: Finding the right mentor

Theme 1: Perceptions of gender difference in the FM Industry

Every one of the twelve women acknowledged there was a perceived gender difference in the industry, for some this was based on an experiential level and for others more of a perception. There did also appear to be a difference in perception on the gender balance from those that worked in the public and private sector, with those in the public sector referring to a greater gender imbalance. There was a particular statement that stood out from one participant who was a senior manager, working in the NHS, with the senior management responsibility for both estates and FM and she

referred particularly to her negative engagement with male colleagues in capital projects and construction: *“I see the reaction from males in the industry at all levels, from operatives working on site through to site managers. Examples include being talked over, omitted from communication, not being consulted, opinion not worthy, etc.”*. She did laugh after she had given this statement, saying that they soon learn to behave differently, and noted being more ‘assertive’ in these environments. This provoked the question when reviewing this of whether women then need to behave differently in the industry. Two other women working in the public sector, one in higher education and another in the NHS referred to having to flex their own natural style to ‘fit in with the boys’. One referred to ‘banter being a requirement’ but the other referred to ensuring they were ‘emotionally resilient’ to ensure they gained the respect of their male counterparts. One of the private sector participants suggested that she does not change her behaviour but must overcome bias on a daily basis. She gave the sense of having to be better than her male counterparts and to achieve more to prove her worth in the role. This does not evidence gender neutrality.

There was a split in views where some people split this gender difference to hard and soft FM, with hard FM being seen as more “gendered” than soft FM which was perceived as having a stronger gender balance in leadership positions. Also, whilst the external perception was of the male dominated industry, one of the participants was adamant that this should not be the case, as working in management in FM is not about “hard skills” but more about leadership qualities and skills, which in her view were non-gender specific .

Overall, the perception was that there is a gender gap within FM, and there needs to be further consideration by the industry bodies on how this can be addressed. The UK Government are starting to try to address the gender gap in organisations through their gender reporting (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/gender-pay-gap-reporting-overview>). The Institute of Workplace and Facilities Management were also perceived by the participants as moving this agenda in a positive way for the industry, but there still feels like there is still more work to be done across the FM industry, in both public and private sectors.

Theme 2: Overcoming the hurdles (from entrance to career progression)

There was a feeling amongst some of the female leaders that one of the main issues for the industry is that FM is perceived externally as “the boys club”. However, there was also discussion of the lack of promotion of the industry to both genders of young people. This has been recognised by the industry bodies in terms of trying to encourage the younger generation to work in FM, however the challenge is to ensure this message and opportunity is being given to all.

One of the more experienced female leaders, with 20+ years’ experience in management within the industry, drew on the changes to entry routes as she felt these had changed from being the old traditional route of entrance to the industry from engineering, military or surveying backgrounds to a more focused approach on strategic and leadership skills. An experienced property manager from the public sector also suggested there could be more targeted apprenticeships for girls into the FM Industry, this provoked an interesting point in that we want to encourage young people, but equally would the industry want to become bias to one gender or another in terms of recruitment. Looking at the CVs that were submitted from the participants, there were varied entrance routes to the FM industry, for some they came from a more technical background such as surveying but for others they have come from a more administrative/management route.

There were notable hurdles or barriers that most of the women had overcome through their careers, from the concept of bias as discussed in theme 1, to watching males being promoted above them, when they felt they had the best skills for the job. This is based on perception and therefore this has been a lived view for some of the individuals. If this had been an isolated case, or a disgruntled employee, you might discredit this discussion, but these women are highly motivated employees who have felt like they have been passed by based on gender. For some this has led to them leaving that employer and finding a more senior position in a different organisation; for others this has been a massive knock to confidence levels, and in Bull's (2019) research where she interviewed senior leaders from all industries, a lack of confidence or even imposter syndrome could have a real impact in applying for their next role. Sherman (2013:57) states that "*the feeling of impostor syndrome is common in women leaders*". One of the women referred to her self-confidence as a blocker to her career and perhaps she could have achieved more if she had more self-belief.

Several of the participants recognised that gaining industry specific qualifications has given them a boost to their career, but also earned them respect from colleagues in the industry (irrelevant of gender). Dinos and Palmer (2015) referred to the concept of academic achievements to self-esteem. They also recognised that networking and being seen in the industry as an expert has helped to move their careers forward.

All the women that took part in this research stated they have advanced their career through hard work and determination, but from some of the conversations it did feel they had to do more than their male counterparts to achieve the same.

Theme 3: Finding the right mentor

This theme was drawn from several different aspects from having informal mentors such as "a great boss" (informal mentoring); to role models that influenced them; and to having formal mentoring relationships. Role models have been an interesting part of most of the participants' journeys in their careers, they have seen female leaders and aspired to 'be like them'. They also talked about the importance for them to be seen as female role models for young women entering the industry, and for some of them they take this further and are committed to speaking at female focused FM events. Interestingly this concept of female role models links back to the eighteenth century when there was a *society* of women who came together to have conversations and to share knowledge (Garvey, 2014), and perhaps this was one of the first acts of role modelling in a society where women would have been second class citizens. One of the women, a Managing Director of an FM company, stated that "*There are some great women role models and the profession has a very strong support network for women in FM and encourages leadership within its fraternity.*" This evidenced a great supportive network, but how easy is it to enter these networks if you are a junior manager with aspirations and not a part of these networks already?

Not all the respondents stated they had formal mentors but most acknowledged that they felt it would have enhanced their career if they had been given one at the early stage of their careers. However, a formal mentor has to be a good fit (not just based on gender) and for those that had been given a formal mentor some noted that this had not always benefitted them, in fact some referred to the formal mentor as a hindrance stating "*Mentoring has sometimes hindered, with hindsight I felt one of my mentors was more focused on her own outcomes and not on mine. There was also (I feel) a bit of jealousy on her part at my perceived success and ability to connect people.*"

This linked to the research by Parker and Kram (1993:43) who found that there could be a disconnect between women wanting to mentor or be mentored by other women; senior women reported *"feeling discounted or overburdened as mentors; junior women complained that senior women are competitive with or unreceptive to them as potential protégés"*. For some the more informal mentoring arrangements with their line managers, or with people they had met through networks, or even their husband, have provided the most inspiration. These were not necessarily gender specific and were borne out of friendship or trust-based relationship.

As Garvey (2014) states there are four main elements of mentoring, the first being based on human qualities, including trust and commitment; the second being based around the skills of listening but also being able to ask challenging questions. The third focuses on the mentee's needs, there is a need to understand their purpose, and the fourth is on the mentor/mentee relationship with a focus on learning and development. Hunt and Weintraub (2002) concur with Garvey's idea in that there tends to be a stronger emotional bond between the mentor and mentee. Deans et al (2006) discussed the impact this type of relationship can have on a woman's confidence. Throughout the qualitative data there were different responses to the benefits of these types of relationships and the ability of the mentors chosen, but perhaps there needs to be better understanding of what it means to be a mentor before people agree to take on a mentoring role.

CONCLUSIONS

This section will draw together the themed discussions evidencing the learning taken from the research along with suggestions on how we can engage more women in leadership positions in FM. As discussed in the methodology section, the themes have been developed from the data, and were guided by the research questions (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The emergent themes evidenced that the women engaged in the research had a particular focus on trying to reduce the gender discrimination in senior executive positions in the industry, they recognised an improvement in recruitment of women, but that there was still a gap in the numbers of women executives in the industry and the sense was that there needed to be more positive action in the encouragement of women to aim for leadership positions. This is a common phenomenon in western cultures and is not an industry related issue per se (Mckeen and Bujaki, 2007; Høigaard & Mathisen, 2009; Surawicz, 2016) but as discussed by many authors on the subject of women in leadership, mentoring relationships have been recognised as one suitable approach for overcoming gender related barriers and female career progression (Høigaard & Mathisen, 2009; Stedman, 2013; Chisholm-Burns et al, 2017; Gipson et al, 2017). Mentoring does offer the opportunity to increase the number of women in leadership roles, but this must be right for the individual, bad mentoring can be more detrimental than not having any at all (Scandura, 1998; Jung & Bozeman, 2019). There also needs to be consideration of the gender of the mentor and the fit to the mentee. Tolar's (2012) research evidenced that having a male mentor may not always be the right approach for a young woman and may have a negative gender influence, a women in their research stated *"I think many older male mentors have ideas about what younger women should do, and if you vary from their suggestion, they see you as a rebel, where men who vary are assertive and powerful"* (Tolar, 2012:181).

In terms of the participants entrance to the industry most came to it via circuitous routes, through administration-based roles, human resource management, and conferencing, whilst there were two participants who had trained as surveyors. Their enablers and barriers to career progression in the

industry were that you may have to work harder than your male counterpart, a need to stand out but also evidenced a need in the industry for the creation of a career pathway for women entering the profession through to leadership roles. For some of them having a sponsor or mentor has been beneficial, but for the most part the enablers were themselves and the support that comes from the female networks they have created (Stedman, 2019). Literature that has focused on leadership as a skill has found it hard to evidence that men or women make better leaders than each other, but perhaps there is still evidence in the FM industry of 'ingrained stereotypes and gender role definitions' (Gipson et al, 2017:48). The facilities management leaders interviewed for international women's day in 2019 evidenced their view that the industry is still male dominated but changes are happening, and the key messages were to remain true to yourself (authenticity), be empathic, be kind and try to reduce the tendency to be self-critical (Facilities News, 2019). Gaining academic or professional qualifications also helped to boost the self-esteem of the participants as this gained further respect of their ability within the industry (Dinos and Palmer, 2015). There is ownership to be taken on both sides of the argument, yes the industry may need to move into the 21st century in some instances and remove the 'old boys club' but women also have to stand up and take the opportunities that are out there, and be prepared to not accept a 'no' and keep pushing at the glass ceiling (Chisholm-Burns, 2017).

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