

Factors that Influence Female Folks to engage in Building and Civil Engineering Construction Site Work in Nigeria – a case Study of Isoko Women

O. Osubor (Fniqs, Rqs)

ABSTRACT: *From early times, building and civil engineering construction has been a male dominated industry. But in today's contemporary times, the women folks have broken this monotony of male domination. This is evident in the building and engineering industry. In Isoko land in the south of Delta State, although women have broken from the stereotype of home keeping into construction, their level of engagement is at the lowest level as casual and unskilled workers. This study looks at the factors that encourage female to engage in construction especially at the lowest level and the implications for the woman, society, and construction industry. Oral interview methodology was adopted in this study. The response of five local contractors/employers and 60 women interviewed at construction site formed the data for this study. A simple percentage was used to analyze data generated. Findings reveal that poverty and unemployment, lack of education and skill, family responsibility and environmental factors top the reasons. Policies that encourage and make it mandatory for women to progress in education and skill acquisition, providing a future for women in construction and a stop to discrimination against women will be a step in the right direction. Such policies are recommended.*

Keywords: *Building, industry, Women, Isoko, Labour*

I. INTRODUCTION

From tradition and ancient times, Building and Civil Engineering Construction has been a male dominated industry and activity (Otokhire, 2016). In those times, women have been known to help/assist their husbands, family and communities during family and community building construction to carry sand, bricks and blocks, fetch water and cook food for the workers. In line with the Traditional African gender theory Skeggs (1997), women are considered less important to their male counterpart such that they are relegated to the upkeep of homes, to oversee the affairs and activities at home while their male counterpart and husbands went to farm and work even though Ojo (1997) observed that Nigerian women have worked side by side with men in agriculture with some marked division of labour between them. In African society, women are excluded from certain occupational categories due to formal and informal barriers to entry. Some of these barriers include lack of education, technical training, customs and traditions, labour laws, religion among others. In a survey, Ojo (1997) stated that only about 6.2% of those in formal employment in 1986, of the level of Managing Director and General Managers are women. It is estimated that more than half of the Nigerian population are women and thus constitute an indispensable force in the quest for national development as no nation can make meaningful progress without the women (Asaju and Adagba, 2013). In contrast to the developed nations, women have been able to play important role. Hitherto, in Nigeria, women were relegated to the background as they lacked the prerequisite educational, economic and political power necessary to actualize their innate potentials. This was one of the focuses of the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing China in 1995. Over the years, women however have broken out from the stereotyped confines of teaching and nursing professions Ekong (2008), and are venturing into the building and civil engineering industry such that The Building and Civil Engineering industry is no longer the exclusive preserve of the male folks. In education, training and practice, women are courageously challenging and gaining acceptance in hitherto male dominated disciplines. The sharp division of labour along gender lines is fast giving way to a more unisex and gender friendly dispositions. Now, in almost any field of study and endeavor, the women folk can be seen to compete favorably with their male counterpart. For example, just like their male counterparts, the women folks have produced Astronauts and space scientists, medical doctors, international footballers, soldiers, lawyers and pilots to mention but few. They have also on the negative produced Kidnappers, Armed robbers, drug peddlers/barons and suicide bombers. This has led to a maxim that 'what a man can do, a woman can also do and even better'. Even though women are venturing into

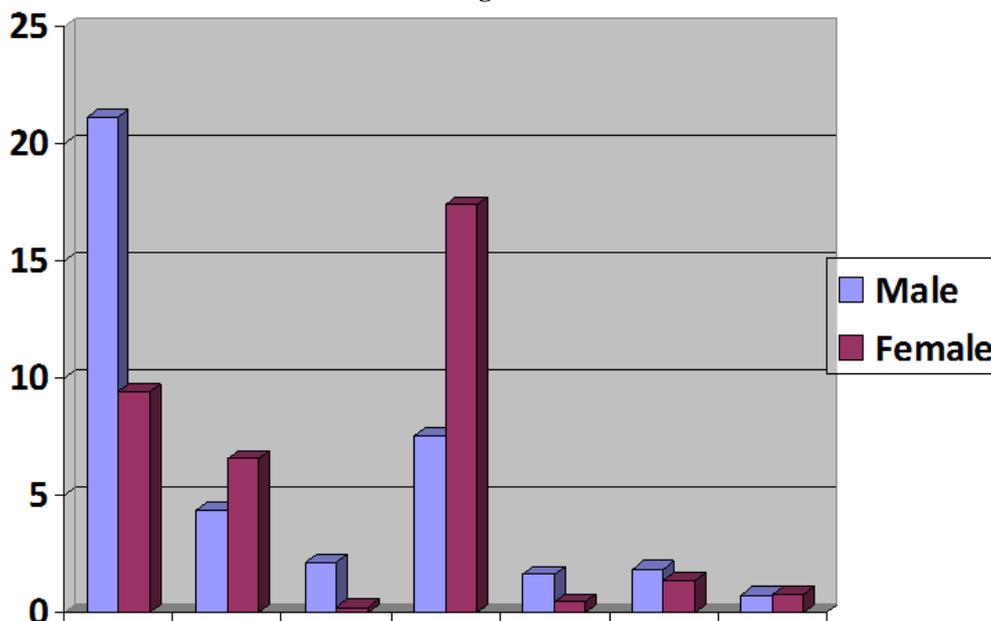
the previously male dominated disciplines, the bulk of women in building and civil engineering construction sites are engaged at the lowest level as casual workers and unskilled labourers and calls for concern. Generally, it is not unusual to see a handful female engineers and professionals at construction sites but a bit unusual for the female to be engaged in stressful tasking manual labour considering their nature. The prevalence of this situation could be traced to the era of implementation of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986 during the administration of Nigeria’s only military president General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida. It is estimated that in the UK, 99% of building site workers are men (Williams, 2015), and www.theguardian.com (2015). Williams argued that gender diversity in the construction industry is shockingly poor. While women make up just 11% of the entire workforce in the UK, on building sites, it is estimated that 99% of workers are men. The scenario is not very different in most urban areas in Nigeria like Abuja, Lagos, Kaduna etc. This paper looks at the peculiarity of engagement of women in the building and civil engineering construction industry with a focus on the Isoko women. The objective is to examine the factors influencing this development, the probable implications and future of this progression on the women, family and society.

II. THE HISTORY OF ISOKO PEOPLE

The Isoko people, Isoko, Wikipedia (2016) are an ethno linguistic group that inhabits the Isoko region of Delta state of Nigeria. It is claimed to be one of the most densely populated areas in Nigeria, with about 500 people per square kilometer compared with the average of 198 for Delta state and 130 for Nigeria. The region is divided into two local government areas (Isoko North and Isoko South). The main economic activity of the region is farming and women form a large proportion of the farming population. There is no definitive accepted official population census figure of the area because previous census figures have been disputed. Isoko land is essentially rural with no urban and semi urban centre but lies in close proximity to Warri city. Its close proximity to the industrial and commercial Warri city has had a backlash effect to the effect that the young and able migrate to Warri, Welch (1934) to make out a living. The residual population is mainly involved in Agriculture and small scale petty commercial enterprises, making unemployment in the area very high. It is one of the oil producing communities; and was the second region to discover oil in 1959 after Oloibiri in 1956. Isoko has over 130 oil wells yet there are no infrastructural developments (www.nairaland.com, 2016). The quality of life is low and below the standard of living recommended by the United Nations Development Organization as in most African societies. It is estimated that close to 90% of those who do the menial job in construction sites are women. What is the attraction?

Within the United Kingdom, construction has an unenviable status as being the industry with the lowest representation of women (Dainty et al, 2004). The same can be true in Nigeria. A survey published by the National Bureau of Statistics (2010) shows the distribution of employed persons by economic activity and sex, the building/construction industry account for only 2.36%, made up of 2.15% male and 0.21% female (Figure 1). This is low compared with Agriculture industry with 21.14% male and 9.43% female or wholesale/Retail trade with 7.51 male and 17.42 female.

Figure 1



	Agriculture, Forestry and Farming	Manufacturing	Building and Construction	Wholesale and Retail trade, Repair	Administrati on and Support	Education	Human Health and Social work
Male	21.14	4.33	2.15	7.51	1.60	1.84	0.74
Female	9.43	6.57	0.21	17.42	0.43	1.37	0.78
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Source: Culled from National Bureau of Statistics – July 2010

Reasons for the low representation of females are not farfetched as studies reveal that the construction work places present a challenging and hostile environment for the women coupled with the discriminatory behavioral attitudes of the dominant male workforce which are common place and probably foul/immoral languages prevalent in Nigerian construction sites. Going by 2006 Nigerian Population census figures, even though the figures are being disputed, it is estimated that women make up about 50% of the population of Nigeria (Martin, 2014). A Women in Construction article estimate that in the United Kingdom, 99% of building sites are men while women account for 1%. This situation prompted Roger Knowles to ask: Does construction need women in its workforce or do women want to work in construction (Jones, 2005)?

III. FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN, BEIJING CHINA

The challenge and encouragement for women folks got a boost sometime 1995 during The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995: with the theme “*Action for Equality, Development and Peace*”. The goal of the conference was to foster women empowerment and equality with men. Arising from the conference, some policies and organizations have sprung up to champion women empowerment including their greater involvement in all disciplines including building and civil engineering and related industries and also to enable women reach their highest potentials. The question begging for answer is to what extent and degree has this been achieved in the building and civil engineering industry seeing that it is only in the lowest level of workers that women operate or are engaged. It is common knowledge that Education plays a very significant role in the life of any society. Observers agree that there has been progress and significant increase in the education and enrollment of the girl child in schools. Nigeria has significantly keyed into and made progress with the goals of the fourth World conference on Women including programmes and policies like Better life for the rural Women 1987, Gender Action plan by the World Bank 2007, Women for change Initiative 2011, Millennium Development Goal 2015, Thirty five percent affirmation plans for Women 1999 – 2015, while awaiting passage of the bill seeking women equality with men by the Nigerian Senate. Research shows that more than half of the female construction workers said they were treated worse than their male counterpart because of their gender. People think it is odd to see women in construction and rate them as anathema but the more the women folk join and increase in the industry, the earlier that perception will change.

IV. FEATURES OF THE CONSTRUCTION SITE WORK AND ITS PROSPECTS.

Construction labour workers can be grouped into three categories: Skilled labour, Semi skilled and unskilled labour (Smith, 1988). Skilled labour refers to labour that requires workers who have specialized training or a learned skill set to perform the work (CLC, 2015). They are capable of working or carrying out their assigned task independently and efficiently and turning out result. This category of workers can have varied levels of training and education. They become licensed or certified in a particular trade. Recruiting this category of best skilled workers can be a time consuming and complicated task. Their pay and conditions of service is higher than the other categories of site workers. Examples of skilled workers include carpenters, electricians, plumbers etc.

Semi skilled workers: These categories of workers have sufficient knowledge of the particular trade (www.citehr.com) skilled, semi skilled and unskilled) and can do simple job or work with simple tools and machines.

Unskilled workers: do not possess or require workers to have any special training or skill. They work under the supervision of the skilled worker and are sometimes referred to as casual workers. They earn less than the skilled worker. Isoko women on construction sites belong to this later category of workers. However, it is

interesting to know that many jobs today that once required little or no skill to do are now demanding increased preparation and skilled levels. It is claimed that the origin and increase in casualization in Nigeria is attributed to government policy of outsourcing – the implication is the abolition of some jobs and services in public sector organizations which in turn engage workers to perform the jobs often on temporary basis with uncertain wages and conditions and without job security. Features and travails of unskilled/casual worker is captured during a protest by the casual workers of a Chinese civil engineering construction company on 23/7/2015 titled “Casualization of workers”. Some of these include starting work as early as 8.00am and close with light, and sometimes may not be allowed lunch break, work everyday all week with no day off, engagement with no letter of employment, no conditions of service, no insurance, no pensions, no severance allowance, no protection from health hazards and construction accidents and the freedom of employer to hire and fire at will. Especially when it is known the contractors have included for these benefits in their bids for contract but would not pay it to their workers. Ufeli (2015), in connectingnigeria.com on 2/11/2015 titled “The casualization of Nigerian workers and legal implication”, for example, observed the provision that any person who employs a woman without granting her maternity rights under section 54, 55, and 56 of Labour Act shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to imprisonment for a period not exceeding one month and wondered if it has ever been implemented.

V. FACTORS THAT ATTRACT WOMEN INTO CONSTRUCTION SITE WORK

If a sample of 50 women was asked whether they want a job in a building and civil engineering construction and what aspect of construction they would like to be involved in. Majority would say no, especially if they have alternatives. A recent equal opportunity report celebrated the fact that 80% of school age girls said they would be interested in learning to do a nontraditional job and only 12% of the 80% were interested in construction. For many people the reason lies in construction poor public image when compared with other traditional jobs like hair dressing, teaching, nursing etcetera, which is female dominated. Other reasons advanced for their position include the stressful nature of construction site work, health and safety concerns which does not provide esteem/dignity and job satisfaction and no prospects for advancement among others. When asked to describe construction, most women describe it as an industry that has no future for the female folks.

VI. METHODOLOGY

The research instrument adopted for this study was oral interview to obtain first hand information from the women and their local contractors. Oral interview was adopted in eliciting information from the target population of this study because most of the women (all Isoko) were either reluctant or unable to complete questionnaire on their own therefore had to be assisted to record their responses. The study involved site visits to eight construction sites in Ozoro and spanned from 2012 to first quarter 2016 during the boom of building of students hostels, lecture theatres and massive construction work in Delta State Polytechnic Ozoro especially the construction of a 14,000 capacity Olympic size stadium, a project in which over 80 women were engaged as casual labourers. The response of 5 local contractors and 60 out of 64 women interviewed on construction sites which showed a 94% response rate, provided the data for this study. The respondents responded to closed ended structured questions. Their response was first tabulated and simple percentage was used to analyze the results.

6.1 Data Analysis and Discussion

The response of sixty out of sixty four women interviewed and five local contractors were used for this study are presented as follows;

Table 1.1

a) **Age distribution:** On the ages of the respondents,

Age	20-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50 years and above	Total
No. of Respondents	9	32	14	5	60
% of Respondents	15	53.33	23.33	8.34	100

Majority of the respondents (46) representing 76.66% from ages 30 – 49 years, are youths and in their productive and reproductive ages and have the ability/strength to do manual work. Some of these women could be pregnant and their pregnancy threatened and their health may face danger due to the nature of the work. Workers who are pregnant are never entitled to nor allowed maternity leave. The future of these categories after their youthful has been spent on construction sites is a matter for Policy makers to address.

Table 1.2**b) Academic/Educational level attained:** On the level of education attained,

Academic level	Nil/None	Primary School	Secondary School	Tertiary Institution	Total
No. of Respondents	6	22	31	1	60
% of Respondents	10.00	36.67	51.67	1.66	100

Over half of the respondents 51.67% have attended secondary school but unable to communicate in writing as well as complete questionnaire by themselves hence the need to use oral interview. This education gap may not be peculiar to Isoko women alone. It was observed during field study that communication on site is mostly in Isoko language. It also supports the argument that entry to this type of work does not require any high level of education.

Table 1.3**c) Marital Status:**

Status	Single/Unmarried	Married/Polygamous	Widow	Single Parent/others	Total
No. of Respondents	11	32	19	6	60
% of Respondents	18.33	55.00	16.67	10.00	100

81.67% of the women are married (including polygamous and single parents and widows), while only 18.33% are single. The married have families/responsibilities to cater for. This could support the claim that most of the female workers have entered into the business to support their husbands/take care of their families especially in polygamous homes which is predominant.

Table 1.4**d) Skill Acquisitions:**

When asked how many have learned any entrepreneurial skills,

	Skilled	Unskilled	Total
No. of Respondents	17	43	60
% of Respondents	28.33	71.67	100

17 respondents representing 28.33% have learned one form of skill or the other while 43 representing 71.67% have not learned any form of skill. Fashion designing (tailoring and sewing), hair dressing and baking top the skills they claim to have learned. On further investigation, majority of those who have learned a skill claimed that although they have learned a skill, they do not have the required capital to establish their business/skill as self employed workers hence they have joined construction / casual work to save money to enable establish their own business/skill. The rest 71.67% who have no particular skill have found construction site work within the neighbourhood a quick avenue for tasking their natural strength for earning money in the absence of possessing any skill training or education.

e) Attraction to construction site work

Despite the poor public image of construction site work for women, there is some attraction for the Isoko women. When asked the major attraction for construction site work, 47 respondents representing 78% attributed it to the present harsh economic conditions in the country since 1986. This was the view held in the literature regarding the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programme and its economic consequences on the family and populace. 64% are attracted by the need to support their family responsibilities and upkeep, 53% are attracted by the quick/daily pay reward system compared to farming which takes months between planting, maintaining and harvest in the face of dwindling harvest/yield and pollution of rivers for fishing, 30% to availability of construction site work providing easy engagement without any special skill or education.. 26% claim it is a quick way to get and save money to enable them start business of skills. The reasons are many and varied and require further investigation.

f) Local contractors/employers opinion:

The local contractors who engage these women accept that they have not contravened any known law of the constitution, the women are easier to manage, less troublesome and less criminally minded, and are prepared to accept a lower pay than the men. They are mostly involved in concrete and masonry aspects. The women shun carpentry, electrical, plumbing or steel fixing trades because these aspects are handled by subcontractors, requiring some skill and the numbers of workers they engage are few compared to the main contractors.

Implications for the woman, family and society

As stated previously, Spooner and Hopley (2011), due to the present level of technology, minimal use of machines and equipments in the developing economies, there exist a ready market for unskilled workers, by implication, employment in this trade may likely persist for some years to come. One major feature of the work is the instant pay method or reward system (daily and instant pay at end of working day). A woman casual worker may not have to wait for the end of the week or month to receive payment for work done as in the case of the farmer who endures for the period of clearing, planting, weeding and harvest and probably selling the goods before harvest/reaping. Payments are not made through the banks requiring spending valuable working time to queue in banks to collect money. However, the benefits are countered by

- a) Accelerated ageing, for by nature, the body of the woman is considered very tender to withstand wear and tear compared to the man. They are likely to look older than their age due to the stress and tasking nature of construction site work and especially with working with concrete and cement which reacts negatively on the skin.
- b) Working hours: Working long hours (8 am to lights) six day week leaves a woman (most of them married women) with little or no time to attend to their children's upbringing and other family chores. Experts argue that neglect and lack of attention/parental care of the child can be responsible for a lot of rots and delinquency in the society.
- c) Prospects: linked to the above is the lack of time and opportunity to engage and progress in education/academics development. Even those of them that learned a skill are likely to forget their skills due to lack of practice as it is often said, 'practice makes perfect'.
- d) Productivity: In construction site work, all things being equal, the output/productivity time for a woman is less than that of a man (1Peter 3:7 '.....giving honour to the wife as unto a weaker vessel'). A reduction in planned output/productivity time for a given task imply a reduction in the programme time for accomplishing work task and delay to completion of contract/project with its attendant issues in contracting.
- e) Society concerns: As more women invade and usurp this hitherto male dominated activity, it has a tendency to keep the men folks out of work, thereby encouraging idleness, a situation observers say can cause the idle man to spend valuable time in drinking and flirting which encourage polygamy.

VII. CONCLUSION

Building and Engineering construction industry, a hitherto male dominated industry is changing to a more gender friendly activity. Women now claim that what a man can do, a woman can do even better. Even though women are taking into construction, they are engaged at the low level of the trade with its attendant challenges. The circumstances that necessitated the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986 have not eased off, necessitating the women to undertake construction site work to support family upkeep. Also, use of manual labour in preference to mechanical plants is likely to continue for some time hence, the barriers identified which include Culture, education and skill acquisition, stigma and discrimination, safety and health hazards must be addressed.

VIII. RECOMMENDATION

Since women have broken from the stereotype into building and engineering industry, deliberate policies and steps has to be in place to remove identified barriers to entry, engage the media to correct the poor public image of the construction industry, encourage the female to progress in education especially to pursue professional courses in the built environment up to tertiary levels, empower women who have learned skills to establish their businesses through loans and other special empowerment programmes of government, and encourage the quick passage of the women equality bill by the senate among others.

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