

Achieving gender equality in the built environment requires a multi-pronged approach

Despite the strong business case for gender diversity in the built environment, gender representation and the advancement and retention of women in the sector remains low. The latest figures released by StatsSA shows that women make up more than 50% of the South African population, however, only 13% of registered persons within built environment professions were women in 2021.



Msizi Myeza, CEO at the Council for the Built Environment

The Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Transformation Collaborative Committee (WEGE TCC), spearheaded by the Council for the Built Environment (CBE), aims to promote the participation and fair treatment of women in the local built environment.

Sector facing serious challenges

“Like any other profession in the country, the built environment sector is facing serious challenges: Slow pace of transformation, ageing personnel, shortage of critical skills and high unemployment rates, especially amongst our youth. It is, therefore, important for the sector to take strides and develop strategies on how best to address crucial issues identified in the skills pipeline strategy for the built environment, especially gender representation, participation, and retention,” says Msizi Myeza, CEO at the Council for the Built Environment.

Various studies show that while it is important to raise alarms about the slow pace of transformation, the gender gap in the built environment commences in primary school and that is where we must intervene. Moreover, a report by the African Academy of Science revealed that by primary school the belief of “girl jobs” and “boy jobs” are already entrenched, meaning that the gendered school curriculum also influences girls’ and boys’ future career choices. A growing body of evidence indicates that female attrition in built environment professions occurs increasingly at the point between tertiary education completion and career transition.



Major obstacles women face

Globally, statistics show that women exit architecture, engineering and construction professions at a higher rate compared to their male counterparts and females leave within the first five years post graduation. In 2014, the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) reported that 70% of the women who graduated with engineering degrees left the profession after starting their careers because they felt isolated in their jobs. Major obstacles that women encounter in the workforce include limited access to career advancement, unsatisfactory remuneration, as well as sexual harassment, inflexible work practices, lack of sanitary facilities on construction sites and the masculine culture of these industry.

“The CBE believes achieving gender equality in the built environment requires a multi-pronged approach, combining hard and soft laws, strategies, including setting targets that are enforced and monitored. Therefore, the alignment between South Africa’s economic, gender, and procurement policies becomes instrumental for the attainment of transformation in the built environment. CBE also believes that this can be achieved through the formulation of gender-sensitive policy frameworks and interventions to improve the working conditions of women,” adds Myeza.

Creating a diverse, inclusive built environment

The work of the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Transformation Collaborative Committee is anchored around creating a diverse and inclusive built environment by building the pipeline of female talent through skills development, identifying support for female entrepreneurship, advocating and promoting gender inclusive policy and procurement, facilitating the representation and participation of women in key decision-making structures, coordination of coaching and mentorship initiatives and through the creation of platforms for strategic partnerships and networking.

“The Council for the Built Environment encourages built environment professionals and councils to champion transformation by positioning themselves as an agent for the change we desire to see in the profession,” concludes Myeza.