



"I ain't no tea lady"

Identifying and addressing barriers to non-traditional employment, training and education from a female perspective

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In 2004, SOVA in partnership with 10 agencies were successful in securing funding from the European Social Fund Equal Round 2 initiative for a 3 year Development Partnership called Women into Work: Building Futures. The partnership was commissioned to promote gender equality and support job de-segregation. This document reports on Phase One of the programme which involved conducting peer research.

Executive Summary

A **literature review** was conducted to contextualise the research findings and includes:

- An outline of the current UK policy agenda around employment and skills
- An analysis of occupational patterns and occupational segregation
- An examination of inequality and disadvantage in employment for specific groups of women
- A review of the attitudes and experiences of employers in relation to women working in non-traditional occupations (NTOs)

In particular the review focused on four areas: construction; transport; arts and the media and Information and Communication Technology.

The employment rate for women in the European Union (EU) is rising faster than male employment. However, in terms of the types of jobs women are taking, they remain within traditionally 'female' employment areas. Women's earnings are reported to remain less than their male counterparts. European Council meetings have produced agreements, which aim to increase the proportion of women who are economically active to 60% by 2010. In order to achieve this, the Council therefore called on Member States to reduce occupational segregation, to improve childcare and to make it easier to reconcile working and family life. The Women into Work: Building Futures programme contributes to these objectives.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to examine perceptions and experiences of accessing non-traditional employment, training and education (ETE) from the vantage point of disadvantaged women using innovative sampling and research techniques. The research design and strategy sought to access the participant's views and valuable experience.

Many of the women whose opinions the research was trying to elicit had never considered non traditional ETE, in their own words it simply was 'not on their radar'. We decided to adopt a 'workshop' approach. A workshop format was designed which used fun and thought provoking exercises to promote discussion. These interactive and dynamic workshops proved successful in generating some excellent data. In total 80 women from a range of areas of disadvantage participated in the research.

The research demonstrated many of the attributes of a peer approach. A researcher with some shared experience with the target group was recruited and, in addition, the research team were very much participants in the workshop groups and a non hierarchical approach was adopted. The researchers also had a shared experience with participants of being women in a 'man's world'.

Key Findings

The data analysis categorises and analyses the transcripts in relation to the four specific research focus areas:

- the definitions/ rationales of the participants about the distinction between jobs for men and jobs for women
- the perceived advantages of non-traditional jobs according to disadvantaged women
- the classification of the women's views of the barriers to women accessing non-traditional ETE
- the cataloguing of the support that women feel they would need to encourage and retain women in non-traditional ETE

Perceived suitability of non traditional jobs for women

Key perceptions raised by participants included:

- Physical restrictions
- Dangerous and dirty nature of work
- Techno-phobia
- Huge responsibility of running own business

Advantages of non-traditional jobs

The women described the benefits of engaging in non-traditional employment in two ways: benefits to the individual female worker and the wider advantages to employers of engaging women.

<i>For women</i>	<i>For employers</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased choice and availability • Job security and increased pay • Potential for personal growth • Challenging the norm/ female stereotypes • Acquisition of skills away from the domestic role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefiting from 'female' skills (e.g. communication, listening, multi-tasking, organisation, empathy) • Clients more trusting of women • Improved workplace atmosphere

Barriers to non-traditional employment

Participants identified the multiple disadvantage experienced in their lives as providing multiple barriers to accessing and sustaining non traditional ETE. Five key barriers were identified in the data:

- **individual perceptions**

The self-perception of women as lacking in self belief, doubting their own ability and less likely than men to 'go for it'

- **societal perceptions**

The societal perceptions of women as being solely responsible for the family and their stigmatic social conditioning containing negative female stereotypes have been shown to impact detrimentally on women's motivation to enter non-traditional employment.

- **practical issues**

The predominantly practical issues of meeting certain physical and health and safety requirements, adequate child care and the lack of appropriate clothing for women have to be addressed in order to encourage women into the non-traditional employment sector.

- **lack of knowledge and awareness**

Non-traditional career options are not promoted effectively to women, while the lack of exposure to female role models working effectively in these sectors undermines the possibilities of women's participation. A negative cycle is created whereby a lack of women working in non traditional sectors results in a lack of women wanting to work in these sectors.

- **male workplace culture**

If we are to encourage women into the non-traditional work place, the male work place culture which categorises women as 'little woman'; 'incapable woman' and 'unstable woman' needs to be addressed.

The women we spoke to had experienced various forms of disadvantage during their lives. It is therefore unsurprising that barriers specifically relating to such disadvantage were raised. In this sense, barriers for this cohort of women were complex and multilayered. In summary, some of the barriers discussed by women in this research could be equally applicable to non disadvantaged women attempting to access non-traditional ETE or to disadvantaged women accessing more traditional ETE. However, the combination of having experienced disadvantage and attempting to enter the potentially hostile non traditional job market seems to create barriers which are more impenetrable for this cohort of women.

Coping Strategies

Participants described a number of innovative coping strategies which could be employed when faced with a male dominated workplace. These reflect the difficulties for women inherent within non-traditional workplaces and the extent to which women feel they have to compromise in order to 'fit in'. Women with experience of non traditional work described how male colleagues were disdainful of stereotypically female behaviour and language. Women at times felt compromised as a result and that they were silencing their true selves. It still seems to be the case that women can't 'be themselves' and also be successful in such environments. This clearly highlights the need for changing attitudes of both men and women around gendered roles and behaviours.

Support mechanisms

The research findings demonstrate that women need to receive support on a variety of levels in order for them to feel confident about entering non-traditional ETE. The five key areas identified were: **attitudinal change; organisational adaptability; practical assistance; awareness raising/effective marketing and empowering models of working. Support mechanisms are further explored within the recommendations below.**

Key recommendations

Attitudinal change

- Individual mechanisms need to be introduced to build women's confidence. Women could also benefit from increased knowledge and awareness of the impact of gender upon societal expectations
- Mentors and role models need to be positioned to inspire and provide valuable support for women accessing non-traditional ETE
- Awareness raising programmes need to be introduced in the workplace and in the community in order to generate more positive attitudes to women working in non-traditional sectors

Organisational adaptability

- Effective policies and appropriate facilities need to be provided by employers to ensure women are comfortable and feel safe in their non-traditional working environments. Policies need to be effectively promoted among the workforce.
- The introduction of more flexible working and training hours in organisations needs to be examined for both men and women in non-traditional sectors

Practical assistance

- The introduction of adequate, affordable and most desirably on site childcare provision would provide valuable support for women accessing non-traditional sectors
- Financial support for childcare cost and re-training in non-traditional sectors and the increased availability of appropriate clothing for women would make women feel more adequately prepared to enter non-traditional ETE

Awareness raising/Effective marketing

- The profile of non-traditional jobs for women needs to be increased through effective marketing strategies, targeted directly at women and girls
- Women and girls need to be alerted to the potential benefits of entering non-traditional, ETE and careers advisors and parents need to ensure the effective promotion of opportunities in girl's formative careers choices
- Employers in non-traditional sectors need to be alerted to the potential benefits of employing women
- Work tasters and voluntary work should be made available for women and girls to explore the possibilities of non-traditional employment

Empowering models of working

- The provision of female support groups and women only training would ensure women have the networks they need to sustain non-traditional careers
- Vocationally based training needs to be provided for women, their male colleagues and employers, to ensure an awareness of the potentially negative impacts of women joining a masculine work place culture and how best to overcome these

Copies of the full report and further copies of this Executive Summary may be obtained from

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