

Fixing it for more Babs the builders

Women in the building industry are organising to ensure better representation for their sex among the professionals, **Richard Brass** reports

JUSTIN THOMAS



Bridging the divide: Generation 4 Collaboration members Katherine Bailey, left, Alex Thorpe, Sarah Bowden and Pascale Scheurer are intent on proving no glass ceiling exists in the building industry for women, despite a lack of senior role models

KATHERINE Bailey is usually too busy with her job in the construction industry to spend time calling the newspapers. But when she read an article in this section last week on a survey to be presented at the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology which showed that a male-dominated environment and workplace culture were discouraging women from becoming engineers, she called to report that her experience was very different and she had the evidence to prove it.

Ms Bailey, 25, an assistant project manager with a large mechanical and electrical contracting group, is also chairman of the Young People's Board of Constructing Excellence, a network aimed at promoting partnership among the disparate parts of the construction industry. Her group, Generation 4 Collaborations, was having a meeting that night which, she said, told a very different story about women in engineering and related professions.

The meeting of 30 young members of professional institutes connected with the construction industry, including civil and mechanical engineers, quantity surveyors and architects, was almost equally men and women.

"These are effectively the next generation in the industry, who are all working their way up the ladder," she

said. "There seems to be a view that there aren't enough women in the industry, but we had a networking event for our umbrella group recently, which was sold out, and there were 250 people from across the construction industry there. Half of them were women.

"The evidence I see is that women are often the most determined and ambitious people. There might not yet be as many women on the boards of companies, but there are certainly plenty of clever, ambitious young women in our meetings who are determined to be on the board."

Sarah Bowden, a civil engineer with the design and engineering firm Arup and a delegate at the G4C meeting, said she had never encountered any gender barriers in the 10 years since she graduated. "Sexism hasn't affected me at all," she said. "I've never met a woman it has affected. When you're out on site, you do have the wolf whistles, but you play that to your advantage. You get them to carry your sledgehammer and you go with the flow."

These young engineers appear to support the findings of the Women and Work Commission, released last week, which said the pay gap between men and women in the UK was not due to employers' practices but inadequate careers advice at school.

"It's not that the companies are ignoring women who are applying for

CLOSING THE GENDER GAP

The report of the Women in Work Commission, chaired by Lady Prosser, released last week, set out a range of recommendations aimed at tackling job segregation between men and women and closing the 13pc wage gap between the sexes.

The recommendations included:

- Taking steps to remove gender stereotyping in careers advice;
- Giving women a better understanding of the pay and prospects in the careers they choose;
- Setting up a national programme to improve vocational training;
- Providing work taster days for primary school pupils;
- Using work experience to encourage women to consider non-traditional jobs;
- Promoting apprenticeships for women, especially in sectors with skill shortages;
- Boosting the quality of part-time work;
- Establishing a scheme to enable women to change direction and raise their skill levels.

jobs," Ms Bailey said. "It's true that in our office of about 150 people, besides admin staff there are only about five or six women with technical qualifications. But there were something like 80 people on my mechanical engineering course at Edinburgh University, and only eight were women. And we were the biggest year of women yet."

She believes much more could be done to encourage girls into engineering, and she is doing her bit by giving talks at schools on the appeal of the profession. "I tell them that it's fun," she said. "You build things, you get out on site and it's not just a man's world. One day I put my suit and make-up on and go to Canary Wharf, and the next

day I'm wearing boots, a hard hat and a high-vis jacket. The response from the girls in schools is brilliant.

"I think it's an image problem. At school, people are often influenced by what's cool and trendy, and at the moment engineering doesn't have a very glamorous image. But just because you're good at science doesn't mean you have to be a doctor or a vet."

Sarah Bowden said her enthusiasm for engineering was sparked early, when as a child she caught sight of Gustave Eiffel's spectacular Garabit viaduct in the south of France. "I'd always been a Lego kind of girl anyway, but I became fascinated with bridges from then on, with how they stood up," she said.

Ms Bowden said she was glad to see employers putting more money into appealing to students than when she graduated. "The problem at that time was encouraging people who had done their degree to stay engineers. All the management consultants and banks and so on came in to do the milk round, with flash presentations, canapes and champagne, and the only engineering firm that came hired one of the worst rooms in the university and gave a presentation with orange squash and handwritten overheads."

The problem of retention also affects other parts of the construction industry. Pascale Scheurer, who qualified as an architect two years ago and is now running her own practice as well as chairing the Young Practitioners Panel at the Royal Institute of British Architects, said the lack of senior female role models was a problem.

She said: "Although 37pc of graduate entrants into architecture are women, women only make up 14pc of architects overall, and at the higher echelons of directors and associates you'll be struggling to find one. For a woman, why would you stay in a profession like that? Why wouldn't you go into finance or banking or law or something where you can see that other women succeed?"

Last year Ms Scheurer and her business partner, Holly Porter, set up Chicks With Bricks, a network of senior

women and young entrepreneurs from all parts of the construction industry. "We couldn't see very many female role models within the industry, so we decided to find out whether there were any and bring them together," she said. Chicks With Bricks has built up a membership of 600 in a year, showing the depth of enthusiasm among women in the industry, Ms Scheurer said.

Skills shortages required the engineering and construction industries to be much more focused in their efforts to attract people, she said. "There's a massive need for project managers, and the Olympics have made it even more urgent. We need to be poaching project managers from other professions, such as finance and banking."

Alex Thorpe of the architecture practice TP Bennett said he believed a more unified voice across the construction industry was essential to solving the skills problem. "If we can create a better, stronger, clearer brand, we've got more chance of getting the right people." For Katherine Bailey, problems attracting people into engineering have a lot to do with what children see on their TV screens.

"People say that schoolchildren only know about jobs that are on TV. I can't think of many TV representations of engineers," she said. "But who knows what the Bob the Builder generation will turn into?"