

A cross-national study of gender diversity initiatives in architecture

The cases of the UK, France and Spain

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Cross-national
study of
gender
diversity

431

Received 28 November 2014

Revised 26 March 2015

27 April 2015

20 May 2015

7 June 2015

Accepted 8 June 2015

Abstract

Purpose – Despite initiatives designed to encourage more women, the construction industry and its associated professions remain resolutely male dominated and the situation shows little signs of changing. Reporting on the findings of an exploratory study which examines the transfer of Equality Policy into practice in three European countries: the UK, France and Spain, the purpose of this paper is to provide cross-national comparisons of the implementation of gender initiatives in a single profession, that of architecture.

Design/methodology/approach – In total, 66 semi-structured interviews were carried out in the qualitative paradigm with women architects in the UK, France and Spain.

Findings – Findings are twofold: first, the research indicates that there are many weaknesses in the support offered and in the design of the initiatives which serve to discourage women rather than encourage them and second, there is a clear need for the dominant body within the industry – the men – to provide the impetus for change.

Originality/value – The research is unique in that it offers a cross-national comparison of the situation within a single profession in a male-dominated industry which has attracted much attention for its lack of diversity and its reluctance to embrace change.

Keywords Diversity, UK, Gender, France, Spain, Architecture

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Gender equality was a founding principle of the European Union in 1957 under the Treaty of Rome, however, the majority of the action has emerged as a result of Directives issued over the last decade. Under this “umbrella legislation” member states are free to enact them how they wish as long as they abide by the basic principles. Yet clearly they are failing to meet their objectives of promoting gender equality and nowhere is this more apparent than in the professions associated with the construction industry and here we report on the case of the architecture profession in particular. We examine how three different member states – the UK, France and Spain – ratify the EU Directives and transfer them into practice with a particular emphasis on the industry-specific initiatives designed to encourage women into architecture. While cross-national studies of the enactment of diversity legislation are not new (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012; Tatli *et al.*, 2012), our research is unique in the sense that it examines a single profession within an industry which is well known for its lack of diversity despite there being a plethora of schemes designed to redress this imbalance.



Cross Cultural & Strategic

Management

Vol. 23 No. 3, 2016

pp. 431-449

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2059-5794

DOI 10.1108/CCSM-11-2014-0141

Through holding the industry constant across the three countries we therefore reduce the likelihood of competing explanations caused by differences between industries which could also vary across national boundaries. By exploring specific initiatives and by dialogue with women in the profession we seek to advance the contributions of previous cross-national studies by providing an in-depth analysis within a single occupational setting. Thus we seek to advance reasons for the failure to achieve any significant gains towards gender parity.

The lack of diversity and poor position of women in architecture (WIA) are well documented (Fowler and Wilson, 2004; De Graft-Johnson *et al.*, 2003; Chadoin, 1998; Molina and Laquidáin, 2009; Caven *et al.*, 2012) and have been the subject of two recent journal special issues (*Architectural Theory Review*, 2013; and *Construction Management and Economics*, 2013). Yet despite this documentation, awareness about the lack of gender diversity has not transferred to the operational level. Women represent only 22 per cent of all registered architects in the UK (source: Architects' Registration Board, 2014), 25 per cent in France (source: Conseil Nationale de l'Ordre des Architectes (CNOA), 2014) and 29 per cent in Spain (Consejo Superior de los Colegios de Arquitectos de España, 2014). The construction industries, too, remain resolutely male dominated with 89 per cent of the French and 88 per cent of the UK construction industries' workforces, respectively being male (source: Eurostat, 2014), while in Spain it is 92 per cent (Instituto Nacional Estadística, 2014). Spain thus has a greater percentage of women architects despite its construction industry being more male-dominated than the UK or France.

We begin by presenting a discussion charting women's involvement in architecture in the UK, France and Spain which we follow with an analysis of how each of the countries has chosen to implement the EU Directives regarding equality and diversity. The discussion then turns to our method of investigation which took the approach of in-depth semi-structured interviews with women architects coupled with desk-based research on the variety of initiatives designed to attract to and retain women in the profession. Our analysis of the data provides an interesting cross-national comparison of the position of WIA in the three countries and raises some interesting points, primarily that the equality initiatives have very limited appeal to those they are designed to attract.

The context of WIA

Women have been involved in the construction industry historically for centuries, from making the components for domestic dwellings to the design of the living spaces. In the UK, upper class women acting in a philanthropic sense, designing social housing projects for their estate workers so have a long history of being associated with design and construction. The first female member of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) was admitted in 1898 although the 1891 Census shows that 19 women were already working as architects (Walker, 1989). In contrast French women came to the profession much later essentially only after the Malraux educational reforms in 1968 (Chadoin, 1998); and, in Spain, while the first female architect qualified in 1936 (Sánchez de Madariaga, 2009), women's involvement in any profession was severely restricted during the Franco regime (Sánchez de Madariaga, 2010). This presents us with an interesting conundrum with the UK, despite women being allowed to practise architecture for a much longer period of time, having the lowest proportion of women architects and Spain, where women have entered the profession much later, showing a much larger number of women in the profession. Mirza and Nacey's

(Mirza and Nacey Research Ltd, 2010) study into the architecture profession in 17 European countries indicates that women are present in higher numbers in countries where the profession is young, (in their case the former Soviet countries of Eastern Europe) which may help explain the higher numbers in Spain.

In all three countries the numbers of women entering architectural education exceeds 50 per cent but a high proportion either fail to qualify or drop out from their studies. It is important to distinguish between failing to qualify and dropping out as in the UK and France professional qualifications, leading to registration with a professional body (The RIBA and Conseil Nationale de l'Ordre des Architectes, respectively) essentially providing a "licence" to practise, taken after the successful completion of architectural education and professional experience are essential in order to call oneself an "architect". Those who complete the education but who do not obtain the licence (i.e. failing to qualify) may still work in the construction industry and are able to carry out many of the duties of an architect although they are unable to "sign off" projects. The length of time taken to achieve full qualification is seven years at a minimum thus acting as a barrier to obtaining the professional qualification. In Spain a one year architectural degree, following five years of study, enables an individual to apply for registration with the Colegios de Arquitectos but a mandatory period of professional experience is not required.

Country-specific approaches taken to encourage diversity

The implementation of EU Directives by individual member states is worthy of separate investigation and the case of equality and diversity is a clear example of how cultural and social norms impact on the enactment in practice. Under an equality approach, which aims to promote fairness and equal opportunity for all, there has long been an assumption that if more women could be encouraged to enter male-dominated professions then along with associated changes in institutional arrangements and workplace culture, the gender inequalities would right themselves (Mills *et al.*, 2014). However, this approach overlooks not only the politics of gender relations (Mills *et al.*, 2014) but also differing policy and legislative arrangements in place and thus ignores the more current diversity approach which aims to be more inclusive of difference. Equality of opportunity for all was a founding principle of the EU from its inception as the European Economic Community under the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and this has led to a series of initiatives requiring member states to develop their respective state regulations of gender diversity within the wider EU framework. Much of this arose during the 1970s in particular as a result of Council Directives 75/117/EEC regarding equal pay and 76/207/EEC for equal treatment for employment, vocational training, promotion and working conditions. While Özbilgin and Tatli (2011) contend that diversity initiatives operate as binary opposites between regulation and voluntarism with differing levels of engagement by those involved the reality is less clear cut and thus, we draw on Social Regulation Theory (SRT) (Reynaud, 1989, 1997) as a means of explaining the difference in the extent of complying or otherwise with the legislation. SRT allows for challenging assumptions that there is a clear distinction between regulatory and voluntary approaches. It highlights the multiplicity of relationships between the actors and by identifying the three different forms of "rules" – control, joint and autonomous – allows us to first explain how the different member states implement EU-instigated diversity initiatives and second how these are then operationalised in different industry or occupational sectors. However, this represents a reductionist explanation and the presence of multiple actors means they

“interact according to agreements they have implicitly or explicitly established” (Reynaud, 1997, p. 15). Referring specifically to the research presented here SRT helps to explain how the Directives are enacted in national settings with different social, cultural, political and religious influences.

On the face of it the UK takes a regulatory approach (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011) with the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010 (which followed earlier legislation such as the Equal Pay Act, 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975) as its response to EU Directives requiring member states to put equality initiatives into place. It is “policed” by the Equality and Human Rights Commission whose mission is to “protect, enforce and promote equality” (www.equalityandhumanrights.com, 2014). The nature of public debate on diversity in the UK is dynamic (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011) but the lack of success is evident (Liff and Wajcman, 1996) perhaps due in no small way to the historical resistance to state intervention which prevails in the UK (Tatli *et al.*, 2012). In the early 2000s the then Labour Government encouraged a more “business-friendly” approach which aimed to promote the benefits of greater diversity and there is a recommendation contained in the UK Corporate Governance Code that FTSE 100 companies should aim for at least 25 per cent female board membership by 2015. However, this remains only a recommendation and not a requirement and there is no sanction for failing to meet it. Overall the greatest progress has been in the public sector where public authorities are required to report on prevention of discrimination and the promotion of equal opportunities although the mechanism on requires the reporting and not binding provision.

The approach taken in France is based on Equality of Rights (Laufer and Silvera, 2006) and relies on a complex system of hard and “soft” laws. As in the UK many of these emanated during the 1970s in response to the EEC Directives but was supplemented by further legislation developed in the 2000s (see Klarsfeld, 2009; Bender *et al.*, 2014). In addition more voluntary approaches were introduced such as the “diversity charter” which is a “commitment text” aiming to “institutionalise equality at work” (www.diversity-charter.com, 2014). An accreditation certified by Association Française de Normalisation is awarded to those organisations who meet the criteria of making a commitment to diversity. In addition, France has introduced a quota for a minimum of board directors to be female, currently this is 20 per cent but rising to 40 per cent by 2017 (Barrett, 2014) but the UK is resisting taking similar action. While France and the UK have responded in opposing ways to the requirements of the EU Directive, Klarsfeld *et al.* (2012) argue that the distinctions are not as straightforward as they may first appear. They go on to suggest that “Control rules are not as binding as they appear” (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012, p. 312) in that much depends on how the “rules” are interpreted by both organisations and the government agencies responsible for the policing of them. They also identify that “Voluntary practices are not as deliberate as they seem” (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012, p. 312) highlighting that many so-called voluntary practices become enshrined within practice as “autonomous rules which gain a quasi-regulatory character” (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012, p. 312). Instead what appear to be binary opposites become somehow conflated. In addition, Lastra (2011, p. 128) argues that soft law means “there is no obligation at all”.

In contrast to both the UK and France and somewhat counter to the binary mode of operationalisation as defined by Özbilgin and Tatli (2011), Spain has chosen not to implement specific policies nor encourage voluntary initiatives instead developing a “practical philosophy” as “a way of managing diversity which is not based on established and preconceived ideas” but rather as a social construction (Zapata-Barrero, 2010, p. 384).

Under this evolutionary strategy, which draws on structural, history and identity contexts, strategic directions are given for political action (Zapata-Barrero, 2010) which then translate into policy. The creation of the Instituto de la Mujer (National Institute for Women) in 1983, with the aim of being the starting point for state feminism, has influenced gender equality public policy development. The autonomous Spanish regions adopted the national model but while it has led to the development of new policy instruments, the complex nature of multiple approaches has ultimately resulted in their fragmentation (Bustelo and Ortballs, 2007) thus reducing their effectiveness. One such example is that large companies of over 250 employees are required to produce an “Equality Plan” to ensure women are not discriminated against (*Personnel Today*, 2007). This initially resulted in a growth in the number of women but more recently it has reversed and opportunities for women have declined to the extent they are in a worse position than before it was introduced (Chinchilla and Kraunsoe, 2012; Gutiérrez Mozo and Pérez del Hoyo, 2012). Likewise legislation introduced in 2007 requiring 40 per cent of board members to be female by 2016 has not had the impact it set out to achieve and currently less than 10 per cent of directors are women. Lack of sanctions is blamed as there are no penalties for non-compliance with diversity statistics only being required when bidding for publicly-funded contracts (GMI Ratings cited by Barrett, 2014). Financial support from the EU encouraged the growth of small businesses by women, thus enabling them to develop working arrangements to suit their individual needs (Caven and Navarro-Astor, 2013) but rather than creating opportunities it instead has created “ghettoes” where women are trapped because they do not have the resources or networks to expand their businesses (Chinchilla and Kraunsoe, 2012). Against this backdrop of variations in practice and thus the numbers of women at board level in organisations it is of no surprise that women are poorly represented throughout at all levels in a male-dominated industry such as construction where most professional services firms fall into the private and the SME sector.

A typology of the approaches taken by the three countries is provided in Table I.

Table I indicates that the approaches taken by France and Spain are similar with their focus on quota systems and legislation while the position in the UK is much less directive and relies on either organisational cooperation or the individual taking action within the law. It illustrates a paradoxical situation in that the UK approach is much more voluntary whilst the “soft” law approaches in France and Spain are subject to much greater legislation. Thus Reynaud’s work on SRT is especially valuable in explaining the micro-processes at work in the implementation or adaptation (Livian, 2014) and the adoption, adaptation and redefinition (De Terssac, 2003) of the rules which are clearly at play here. Key distinctions are that the UK public sector has a much greater requirement to report than the private sector and that organisational size is more significant in both France and Spain. In terms of aiming for greater levels of gender equality in architecture both distinctions are problematic as the overwhelming majority of architects in all three countries are employed in small or medium-sized organisations generally within the private sector (Mirza and Nacey Research Ltd, 2015).

Methods

The data reported here are from a comparative study examining the careers of women architects in the UK, France and Spain. Comparative studies are frequently used in sociological studies but rarely in cross-national research (Winch and Campagnac, 1995) but as Winch (2000, p. 88 citing Zeigert and Kötz, 1998, p. v) argues “it is from comparison that knowledge comes”. In the case of this study we are able to provide a

	Extent of positive action	UK	France	Spain
Most regulated	Quota systems	n/a	Firms with < 500 employees and < €50 m sales or total assets to have ≤20% female board membership by 2014 rising to 40% by 2017; 40% of top civil service appointments to be female by 2018	Publicly traded firms with < 250 employees 40% gender board quotas by 1 March 2015
	Requirement to adopt action plans with goals and timetables	n/a	Employers with < 50 employees to have action plan in place	Public sector required to have aims, objectives and actions; all companies with < 250 workers have to negotiate firm-level equality plans
	Requirement for gender representation, equal pay, training opportunities, etc.	n/a	Employers with < 300 employees required to report	n/a
	Reporting on gender pay and gender representation (disclosure requirements)	Public authorities must report on prevention of discrimination and promotion of equal opportunities	Employers with < 50 are required to report gender data	n/a
	Encouraging gender equality (best-practice recommendations in Codes of Conduct – codes of good governance)	FTSE 100 companies to aim for at least 25% female board membership by 2015	n/a	Distinctive label on gender equality
Least regulated	Reaffirmation of duty enforced by legal system	Legal compliance by public and private sectors	n/a	n/a

Table I.
Typology of positive action by country

comparison of WIA in three different national settings examining a variety of contextual and micro-variables than is normally feasible in larger scale cross-national studies (Hantrais, 2009).

Taking an interpretive approach in the qualitative paradigm 66 semi-structured interviews were carried out with women architects (identified from the respective

professional bodies): 37 from the UK, 11 from France and 18 in Spain. All the women were interviewed by a native speaker; in the UK and Spain the interviews were carried out face to face but the French architects were interviewed by telephone using Skype and Callburner as a recording mechanism. We acknowledge that the unequal sample sizes are a limitation of the research but greater methodological compromises are required with cross-national research (Mangen, 2007); and, additionally, the interview data are used in a supporting role for illustrative purposes rather than being the whole focus of the paper. By taking a career history approach we were able to explore the influences and events which had shaped their working lives and the meanings they had taken from them. The topic areas discussed were what had attracted them to architecture initially; then they were asked to describe their career history highlighting the highlights and low points; and, then to identify what they found rewarding and stressful. The women were deliberately not asked directly about equality in order not to skew responses but if the subject arose, the interviewers probed further to elicit reactions and examples. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to almost four hours. In line with Irvine (2012) we found that while the telephone interviews were shorter they were not necessarily any less informative than those conducted in person. The UK and Spanish architects tended to use the interview as an opportunity to reflect on their careers, thus deviating from the topic areas at times (e.g. one spent a considerable part of the interview musing over when would be the “right” time to have a baby) whilst the French women focused on answering the questions.

Analysis was carried out in a thematic way using a grounded in theory approach (see Authors, 2012 for a full discussion) which allowed us to identify key emergent themes while acknowledging how theory relating to women working in male-dominated professions such as construction influenced our questioning; first by matching back to the topic areas of the interviews and then secondary analysis conducted by identifying themes which arose from the interviews. This was followed by a period of desk-based research in which the various initiatives to attract women into the profession and to support them while there, were evaluated in depth. Our analysis now follows.

The disconnect between state and sector

Professions are “occupations with special power and prestige” (Larson, 2013, p. x) and thus self-regulate their activities via the professional bodies. Governance of the profession is by the professional bodies – the RIBA (UK); the Conseil National de l’Ordre des Architectes (CNOA – France); and, the Consejo Superior Colegios de Arquitectos de España (Spain) which design and maintain professional standards, control entry to the profession and monitor the conduct of their membership but they are not required by the state to specifically implement gender equality. Thus while there are the state-mandated approaches to improving the position of women in the workplace, it is lacking at the level of the profession itself. Initiatives towards greater diversity within architecture have been generated externally and while there may be support or sponsorship provided by the professional bodies, this is more as an outsourcing of their obligations rather than actually driving change.

There are clear distinctions in how diversity initiatives are approached in each of the three countries with France adopting the most formalised method through the inception of UIFA under the Loi de 1901 which provides a legal framework governing its existence. In contrast WIA is sponsored by industry organisations including the RIBA but is not regulated in the same way. Spain is taking a more

unique stance aiming to implement change through its education system fitting with its “practical philosophy” position (Zapata-Barrero, 2010). The sector initiatives are shown in Table II.

The (in)efficacy of initiatives

As part of a process of triangulation we carried out desk research into the range of initiatives designed to attract women into architecture and to act as support mechanisms for their careers. These were predominantly UK based which provides us with an interesting initial insight in that it is in the UK where women have been involved with architecture the longest (Walker, 1989) yet still have not reached anywhere near a “critical mass” within the profession. The majority of the UK initiatives appear to be transient in nature appearing then becoming subsumed into later initiatives. Frequently they give the impression of being “gimmicky” with names like “Chicks With Bricks” which first appeared in 2005, then became part of the ‘People in Space’ network and has now re-established itself as a “Celebration of Women in the Built Environment” (Chicks with Bricks, 2014). Its aim is to provide networking and mentoring opportunities for young women in construction. However, its focus on social events serves to detract from its aims and also excludes those who are unable to attend because of its London-centric location.

The Building Design 50:50 campaign was launched in January 2005 deliberately as a short-term initiative to promote a charter of five pledges to be adopted by employers pledging greater equality in recruitment and pay for women architects, flexible working, monitoring of working time, contractual provisions for maternity and paternity rights and the appointment of a “champion” to promote the charter (Matthewson, 2012). Its target was to have 250 practices sign up by International Women’s Day in early March 2005 but it quickly became tainted via its adoption of dubious tactics and its strategy of “naming and shaming” architectural practices which refused to sign up to its charter (Matthewson, 2012). While it exceeded its target, as Matthewson (2012, p. 248) explains, it “tended to gloss over the multiple and complex dynamics at play in the profession, and to over-simplify issues surrounding gender equality in particular”.

Form of initiative	UK	France	Spain
Sector-supported initiatives	Women in architecture group (part-sponsored by the RIBA)	UIFA (loi de 1901): International Congresses Contributions to the International Archive of Women in Architecture	n/a
Education	n/a	n/a	Gender mainstreaming in the teaching of architecture at the University of Alicante “Valentinas” series at Universitat Politècnica de València
Publicity	Chicks With Bricks Building Design 50:50 campaign	L’Ordre des Architectes: Publicity for unique projects (not specifically gender related)	Roca Madrid Gallery: “Spaces for women architects. Talks about reality”

Table II.
Sector initiatives

WIA is a more long-standing support and campaigning group to support women in the profession but falls into the same cliché as Chicks with Bricks by overloading its website with pink graphics. It is supported by the RIBA although we suggest this is purely as a means of absolving the RIBA from having to maintain its own equality agenda.

In France, the Union Internationale des Femmes Architectes was founded in 1963 by Solange de la Tour as a response to being told by her local mayor not to submit plans for a competition for a project as “the profession was reserved for the masculine sex having accomplished their military service” (www.uifa.fr., 2011). It currently has over 2,000 members representing women in 90 countries and actively promotes the work of its membership to political and social authorities. In addition, with its partner organisation the International Association of Women Architects in the USA maintains an extensive archive of designs and other historical documentation relating to women architects. To date it has held 17 international congresses which aim to increase public awareness of the work of women architects also to engage with wider debates in society such as environmental issues which was the focus of the most recent congress held in 2013 in Mongolia. While it promotes the development of networks and mutual support it differs from the UK initiatives in that it has demonstrated greater longevity and takes a much more formalised approach in its attempts to raise the profile of WIA. Like the majority of the campaigns and initiatives in the UK, it is capital city-centred being based in Paris, however, France differs from the UK in that there is a significant concentration (33 per cent) of architects based in the Paris/Ile de France region (source: CNOA, 2014).

Initiatives in Spain exist in a much different sense being aimed at encouraging young women to study for a degree in “technical studies”, encompassing construction-related professions including architecture, engineering and the like. The initiatives are sponsored by individual universities who are keen to encourage greater gender diversity and operate under the umbrella title of “Girls’ Day España” and are run by female professionals thus acting as role models. They are supported by an association promoting the advancement of women in science and technical professions, the Asociación de Mujeres Investigadoras and Tecnólogas.

However, once again we note the tendency to use gimmicky titles demeaning to women with one such scheme aimed at girls finishing high school being titled “Valentinas – La Serie” – Valentinas being a play on the location of the university’s location in Valencia – emphasising once again their “femaleness” and, thus, “difference” in the same way as many of the UK’s initiatives. As Matthewson (2012, p. 252) argues “women who work in the architecture profession are reluctant to be marked out according to their gender” so initiatives highlighting this are unlikely to appeal. However, a more radical approach has been adopted by the Universidad de Alicante which has modified its study programme to include a gendered perspective specifically to attempt to improve gender equality:

At University, there is not a diversity view on history, architectural theory or practice. Subjects are taught from an occidental, white and masculine profile. There is resistance to acknowledge the problem or the belief that it has already been solved. There is also excessive formality in teaching and weak knowledge foundations. Schools of architecture should be the 1st place for action in order to obtain gender equality in architecture. [We] want to teach with a gender focus, showing the work of women architects to students, so that they could have women architect references in mind (Gutiérrez Mozo and Pérez del Hoyo, 2012, p. 52 – translation by one of the authors).

This scheme is interesting in that it reflects the “practical philosophy” behind Spain’s approach to equality and diversity, however, it is not a straightforward solution. It will take time to adapt the mind set in a nation renowned for its patriarchal structure and culture (Aguilera, 2004).

The impact of those initiatives specifically aimed at women is not to redress the balance or as a response to male-dominated workplaces but rather they are attempts to meet women’s needs. However, by “normalising” the status quo the outcome is the “explanation for women’s under-representation is displaced onto women themselves” (Mills *et al.*, 2014, p. 12) thus we now turn to our interview data in order to explore this notion further.

WIA today in the UK, France and Spain

The age range of the interviewees was from 27 to 72 which included two who were retired, four who were unemployed at the time and two on maternity leave/career breaks, giving us a broad range of professional experience and varied career histories which are indicated in Table III.

In the discussion that follows the women are identified by their age, country and length of service as these all impact on the interpretation of the data. Those with the longest service will have completed much of their career prior to the more recent legislation while those at an early career stage are likely to have a much higher awareness of equality and diversity issues. The section begins with a discussion on what prompted the career choice of architecture then moves to consider the women’s awareness and engagement with equality and diversity issues.

Entering a male-dominated profession

One of our opening interview questions was to ask why the women had chosen a career in architecture given that the construction industry is overwhelmingly male dominated. The responses were somewhat surprising in that no one had made a conscious decision to become an architect based on researching the career in depth contrary to mainstream career theory which suggests that a rational choice is made based on the meaning and identity with the chosen career (Super, 1957; Levinson, 1978). Instead the reason given by the majority of women for becoming an architect was that it was an inherent desire stemming from childhood, this was followed by having a parent working in the

	UK (<i>n</i> = 37)	France (<i>n</i> = 11)	Spain (<i>n</i> = 18)
Age range	27-72	32-58	27-60
<i>Employment status</i>			
Self-employed (UK), libérale (FR), autónomo (SP)	11	5	4
Unemployed, retired, career break	4	0	4
Salaried	13	0	0
Director, owner	6	2	2
Public sector	3	4	8
<i>Length of service</i>			
1-10 years	14	4	7
11-20 years	12	1	8
21-30 years	8	4	0
31+ years	3	2	3

Table III.
Interviewee data

construction industry which would at least provide some insight into what the profession entailed. However, the third most common reason was being good at both maths and art at school and comments like “there’s not much else you can do with these subjects” (UK, age 44, qualified 19 years). Overall there was a distinct lack of awareness as to the culture of the industry and the nature of the work itself. Careers guidance at school had raised the notion of architecture as “not appropriate” for women but where it had been mentioned it was dismissed by the women who perceived it as an obstacle to fulfilling their dream of becoming an architect. Our oldest respondent (age 72) had qualified shortly before Second World War started and admitted that she had an advantage of becoming established during the war years but it was expected (Hakim, 1996) that she would give up work when her husband returned home. However, her earning capability was higher than his so she used this to justify continuing to practice.

While the lack of awareness as to the nature of the profession was unanticipated, it was surprising that none of our respondents entered the profession with a strong feminist agenda or in order to promote equality. It was evident from our interviews that the women did not realise the profession was so male dominated until they arrived at university and found themselves in a minority, one of our interviewees mentioned her course had “about 30 students overall of which six of them were women and I was the only one to qualify so the dropout rate was and is disproportionately high” (UK, age 27, qualified two years). In fact one UK respondent told of how she left a feminist cooperative because “they were coming to you with the issue all the time” (UK, age 42, qualified four years) and only one (UK based also) discussed feminism itself. There was an expectation on their part that they would be treated equitably in line with their male counterparts. The Spanish women mentioned unequal treatment and heightened visibility due to their gender much more so than those in the UK or France and spoke of constantly having to “prove oneself” (Spain, age 35, qualified ten years). Asking for maternity leave was seen as requesting “a favour, a privilege I had for being at home with my baby” (Spain, age 42, qualified 15 years) while another was back on site within a week of giving birth for fear of being substituted by a man. The French women overall played down gender as being significant and told of proving themselves through their work instead or commanding greater respect as they became older. One mentioned “I was one of the first female architects to set up in the Charente area [...] first woman [...] I have never felt [...] in the relationships I have never felt it [dominance of men] [...] With seniority and reputation, it gets better” (French, age 57, qualified 31 years).

(In)visibility

Spain is widely known as being a very patriarchal society and despite women being present in the architecture profession in greater numbers than in France and the UK, their position is poor yet they were immediately much more visible to their male industry colleagues. Spanish women architects told of being patronised in all aspects of their working lives whether in the office environment or on site. Their voices and appearance were commented on with comments like “you’re just a beautiful face for them, that’s all” (Spain, age 27, qualified three years) as if to emphasise their “femaleness” and by association their unsuitability for the role. In addition, several reported they were not allowed to visit construction sites or deal with clients and had to remain office based or not being allowed to work on prestigious projects instead being restricted to small projects. One mentioned how “my bosses were the ones going on site,

my work had to do with the plans and I stayed in the practice [...] because we are supposed to be tidier and calmer” (Spain, age 35, qualified ten years) while another stopped visiting site because “they would start whistling at you and you’re supposed to be the site director” (Spain, age 58, qualified 23 years). This all restricts the potential for their career development as they cannot develop the portfolio necessary to be able to strengthen their professional reputation sufficiently to advance.

The French women spoke of being regarded as a “curiosity” until they had established their reputation with one in particular relishing the renown it gave her enhancing her reputation; she had studied in the UK and developed a specialism in bioclimatic buildings. When she set up her own agency in France “[t]hey looked at me like I was talking Chinese!” (France, age 39, qualified 12 years) but the strategy worked and helped raise her profile helping her to win prestigious projects including one for a luxury goods multinational which she refers to as the “beast”. “People in the area around, politicians [...] all want to come to see the ‘beast’ so that’s nice”. Another said she felt being a woman meant “it’s easier for a contractor to say to a woman: ‘I don’t know [...]. Help me out, let’s talk about it’ than to a man. Perhaps they’re more tolerant towards us and we’re more listened to” (France, age 47, qualified 19 years).

In contrast the UK women appeared invisible – they did not report difficulties from construction workers on site but this may reflect the power imbalance as they occupy a stronger position because of the supervisory nature of the architect’s role on site. Instead where they reported problems regarding exclusion and sexism it was from their professional colleagues. They spoke of being ignored by male professional colleagues on site and in meetings, or of being deliberately excluded from conversations which were described as “invariably about football” (UK, age 41, qualified 16 years). One woman was deliberately omitted from an invitation to a corporate golf day despite being an exceptionally good player and able to compete equally with men. Another mentioned that during an industry seminar where she was the only woman that when introductions were made she was left out as the men had assumed she was only there to take notes until she asked “what about me?” (UK, age 42, qualified four years); while a third – who was the practice principal (owner of a small practice) – attended a meeting with a much younger male year out student and realised that all the questions were being directed towards him rather than her as the senior architect (UK, age 48, qualified eight years).

We heard of one UK employer being referred to by two women (in separate interviews) as a “sexist pig” – he typically recruits young newly qualified architects and exploits them, paying them less than their male counterparts. Despite there being protection in the law for these UK women, they were reluctant to proceed in this way for fear of being perceived as litigious and damaging future job prospects. Another employer denied a female employee a company car while providing one for a male colleague citing him as being more deserving and “you can always use your husband’s car” (UK, age 42, qualified 17 years).

Local authority employers were, however, highlighted as environments where there were mixed responses regarding sexism and harassment by colleagues, this is due to general higher levels of awareness of equality in the public sector with one woman saying “It was quite liberating working there [local authority], I was treated as an equal [...] before I had situations where the boss would come around being nice to the boys and then be bitchy to me” (UK, age 40, qualified eight years).

However, two other women who had worked in the public sector had suffered from harassment from male colleagues but took recourse through the more clearly defined

grievance procedures in place. The contraction of the public sector in the UK has meant that the majority of architectural work is now contracted to the private sector resulting in the perpetuation of inequality and marginalisation.

Engaging with networks/supporting initiatives

While we did not question specifically about the perceived impact and support derived from the policy initiatives, the women were asked about the professional bodies and the levels of support offered to them in their careers. The designer of the “beast” (mentioned above) told of how “there’s l’Ordre des Architectes who want to publicise what I’ve done because it’s the only project like that in [the region]” (France, age 40, qualified 12 years) thus representing the professional body positively. In contrast the UK women were “guilty of never having darkened the doors of the RIBA” or who objected to the London-centric nature of events whether they are networking events organised by the initiatives discussed above or from RIBA training occasions such as one aimed at women returners to architecture following career breaks which was described by one of our interviewees as impossible to attend because of the distance.

French women architects reported that networks were key in maintaining their reputation although none were members of UIFA. While several reported that they felt L’Ordre des Architectes were helpful this was more for professional support rather than promotion of gender equality. Several of the UK women mentioned the group WIA but none had engaged with it or its activities. A key factor is time, long hours are well documented as a feature of the profession (De Graft-Johnson *et al.*, 2003) which then impacts on the ability or desire to participate. Any such “free” time is absorbed by the need to attend events which attract the necessary continuing professional development hours.

None of the Spanish women felt their professional body was supportive or helpful; in fact the trade union representing architects accused the professional body of perpetuating the low status of the profession and attendant low wages. In addition, they were denied access to the informal networks necessary for obtaining projects and “if you don’t have connections, it’s difficult to get work. Let’s not deceive ourselves; it’s even more difficult when you’re a woman” (Spain, age 60, qualified 35 years). Another commented about the difficulties associated with moving to a new region and “you’re in a profession where surnames work a lot, at least in small provinces” (Spain, age 42, qualified 17 years).

Discussion and conclusions

The UK’s way towards the creation of diversity initiatives focuses on networking and socialising; in France the tactic is of a political/activism nature whereas in Spain it is directed towards attracting women in higher education. Whatever the approach taken the aim is to attract women to and retain them in the architecture profession, however, their impact has been limited as numbers of women are not reflecting the same proportions as in other professions. Equality initiatives are clearly failing and are not engaging those they are designed to help whether they stem from “control rules” or “voluntary practices”.

A common theme among all the initiatives is their focus on women alone; their emphasis is on events or campaigns which are aimed at women with the exception of the Building Design 50:50 drive which due to its questionable methods managed to alienate many employers. Thus their effectiveness is limited due to the lack of a “critical mass” of women in the profession who are able and willing to help other women. We argue that while men are excluded, they then either remain unaware of the

imbalance or are aware of it but feel that it does not concern them. Recent difficult economic conditions which in turn impact on the construction industry have meant that there is an over-supply of architects and while this is the case the position of women in the profession will remain poor.

The Spanish women, unlike their French or UK counterparts, have the protection of a trade union (El Sindicato de Arquitectos de España), however, gender equality is not one of its objectives despite women accounting for majority of directors. The French and UK women instead are “protected” by their respective professional bodies which provide codes of conduct for employers and employees alike – however, there is little guidance by either the CNOA (France) or the RIBA (UK) in terms of support for equality. A recent report by CNOA provides a detailed overview of the architecture profession in France including earnings, age of those in the profession, working arrangements, value of projects and the like but makes no mention of the number of women. Likewise, the latest edition of the RIBA practice handbook (Ostime, 2013) has omitted the section contained in the previous edition on equality or gender issues. The earlier edition (Lupton, 2005) included a section on the employment of women focusing on part-time working and childcare with the implication that these would be problematic instead of suggesting workable solutions.

Many contracting organisations in the UK are affiliated to the Considerate Constructors Scheme which aims to promote the image of construction. Its “Code of Considerate Practice commits those sites and companies registered with the Scheme to care about appearance, respect the community, protect the environment, secure everyone’s safety and value their workforce” (Considerate Constructors Scheme, 2014). While not specifically referring to equality or diversity matters its remit is broad enough to encompass behaviours of employees in an implicit format. However, we argue, it actually discourages the assimilation of women into the wider construction community because it is behaviour driven rather than attempting to change values or norms. However, while the UK women have protection via the law it is failing them due to high costs financial and emotional terms as well as the potential damage to their professional reputation supporting Klarsfeld *et al.*’s (2012) observation that control measures are not as binding as they seem.

Indeed the Considerate Constructors Scheme could be said to be a prime example of the weaknesses in the system of control measures in that it is funded by its member organisations in order to outsource their own responsibility for monitoring behaviours. Continuing the theme of measures not achieving their aims, the French “diversity charter” relies largely on self-auditing by organisations which in turn can be problematic (Klarsfeld, 2009; Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012).

It is significant that none of our interviewees had carried out any prior research on what architecture entailed neither as a career nor what the working environment may entail before entering the profession. Some had got an insight from family or friends who worked in the construction industry but in the main, these women would have forged a career in architecture irrespective of any kind of initiative designed to encourage them. In fact, the converse is true with our oldest interviewee, who despite UK Government “encouragement” for women to give up work following Second World War, used her superior earning power as her justification for continuing to practise.

Contrary to common perceptions of the construction industry as sexist only the Spanish women reported construction sites as being unpleasant to visit. The UK and French women mentioned they were respected when on site. The UK women told of harassment and sexism from their male colleagues or employers whereas the

French women did not report any instances possibly as working as a “liberale” in an agency was the most common working arrangements thus offering greater autonomy rather than being part of a larger organisation.

The visibility/invisibility conflict reported by the Spanish and UK women perhaps arises from the different approaches to diversity taken in the respective countries with the sanction-based mechanisms in the UK serving to promote women’s lack of visibility and assimilation. We argue that confusing plethora of initiatives and resulting sanctions for non-conformity mean that men in the profession and industry take the “easy” option of ignoring them and those who they are designed to help. The continuing focus on those initiatives directly solely at women serves to exclude men who then remain disincentivised to act. However, the question of whose responsibility to instigate change and maintain it against such a backdrop of entrenched structural and cultural “norms” needs to be asked. Greed (2006, p. 71) argues that “(e)xpecting a small minority of women to be the change agents to turn around an entire industry is putting a tremendous burden and responsibility upon women entrants. This stance ignores the need for major cultural and organisational change upon the part of the men who comprise 95 per cent of this sector”.

What we have seen through our research is the very different ways that EU Directives are enacted by the member states and how this then filters down into practice. There is the approach based in law with attendant sanctions as adopted by the UK; the “voluntarist” method of obtaining an accreditation closely monitored within the legal framework as implemented in France and the “bottom up” redefinition of architectural education being trialled in Spain – however, none of the approaches appear to be having the desired effect of improving gender equality. The multiplicity of approaches reflects the manipulation of the “rules” as outlined by Reynaud’s (1989, 1997) SRT in that each country is seen to be implementing the EU Directives but there is little in the way of change occurring as a result. In fact, there is clear evidence to support Klarsfeld *et al.* (2012, p. 322) who state that while SRT allows for the construction and manipulation of rules it also produces the means for the sector “to demolish them or let them fall into oblivion”. The “rules” are thus influenced by the different national settings and the variations in employment relations within them. The UK follows a much more liberalised market-driven approach to equality issues (Hyman *et al.*, 2012) than either France or Spain, however, there are also differences in the provision of childcare as well as variance in cultural and religious attitudes towards women’s involvement with work. We support the argument from Greed (2006) that it is too big a burden and responsibility for women alone especially as they do not form part of a critical mass and nor are their voices heard. We argue that until men themselves engage with the need for greater equality and diversity to a much larger extent and start taking effective action to start changing entrenched culture and mind sets that little progress will be made.

Thus the contribution made by this paper is twofold. First the differences in the mode of implementation and adaptation of the EU Directives by the three countries are examined and this leads to the identification of a point of disconnection between nationwide initiatives and their transfer into a profession. The small size of the employing organisations largely absolves them from regulation regarding reporting requirements or having to introduce gender quotas. In addition, the system of governance over the profession (via the professional bodies) is weak in terms of implementing gender equality as they are not actively promoting change, instead relying on individual employing organisations operating within the state framework. Second, by reporting

the experiences of women working as architects in different employment contexts, the research shows an unwillingness to become involved with initiatives intended to promote greater equality for all women whether it is through lack of time or not wanting to be labelled as an activist thus potentially affecting future projects or employment prospects. Our contribution to extant diversity literature is that while it is apparent that state mechanisms driving the gender equality agenda are in place, there appear to be “fracture points” which inhibit the transmission of policy into effective practice. This would benefit from exploration via further research. Conversely while those women working in architecture wanted to be treated fairly both in their organisations and in the wider construction industry, there was a sense of “resigned accommodation” of the position. The implications for practice are to identify why this may be the case and highlight what could be done to address it.

There is clearly a need for the respective professional bodies to play a much greater role in redressing the inequality present in the profession. They should be taking a much more proactive approach by developing feasible policies rather than relying on the existence of what are largely informal initiatives and schemes. To help address the limitation of unequal sample sizes present in this research, the topic would benefit from further and larger scale research to specifically investigate women’s perceptions of and levels of engagement with equality initiatives which would then be used to inform the development of policy within the profession.

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