

Where are the women in major projects leadership?

Examining the evidence for a new approach in the drive towards gender balance in major projects



KEY WORDS

- Gender
- Major projects
- Women
- Leadership
- Project management
- Balance
- Diversity

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Abstract

This report addresses the representation of women in the leadership of major projects (MPs) and the wider issue of gender balance. Women continue to be largely absent from leadership roles in major projects, despite decades of investment and attention on initiatives designed to tackle a 'leaky pipeline' in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). There is a need to re-examine equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) approaches and explore what gender balance could mean for the growth of the wider project management profession. This research finds that EDI solutions typically focus on 'fixing women to fit' and are failing to challenge a 'masculinist' culture that is prevalent across major projects. In the design of EDI programmes, there is also a stark absence of influence from gender theories that have been widely accepted in academic research. This report examines the approaches to gender balance in major projects through a literature review that was commissioned by the APM Research Fund. It features as part of a broader action research programme on the leadership and delivery of major projects that is being led by the Bartlett Faculty for the Built Environment, University College London, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.



Background

Major projects or megaprojects (and project management more generally) have become the chief mechanism through which government and project enterprises deliver some of the most national-critical and politically sensitive policies for the country. However, women are still largely absent from leadership roles in these projects. Out of 133 major projects currently listed on the UK Government Major Project Portfolio,¹ only around 22 per cent of the appointed senior responsible officers are women. There is even less representation of ethnic minorities and other demographic diversity.

There are multiple factors that contribute to the under-representation of women in the leadership of projects. Firstly, most of the pipeline comes from STEM subjects that are still predominately male in uptake, from school right through to graduate career choice. Secondly, there is the outcome of certain 'thinking processes' around social judgement and ideals of leadership, which shape stereotypes and perceptions of the roles men and women play at work and in society. Lastly, the realities of taking up a leadership mantle are seen to put off many women (and men) from pursuing senior roles.

Research on gender in organisations explores how norms and assumptions linked to gender are established and re-established in the workplace.² These approaches show that "gender is not a property of person but a process that people enact in everyday situations".³ There has been a wealth of feminist academic literature over the past 40 years that has pointed to how 'masculinist' workplace cultures can be falsely perceived as neutral.⁴ We view that the organisational practices and cultures that are created during the delivery of major projects to be no exception. This report critically examines the approach of gender balance initiatives against a context of gendering organisations theory and hypothesises that a more research-evidenced approach should be adopted.

Approach

This review draws upon existing grey literature, organisational strategies and academic concepts to examine the ongoing challenges of attaining gender balance in major projects. The authors, who have worked as researchers in gender theory as well as professional leadership experts, draw on the available evidence and highlight a series of recommendations for both practitioners and researchers to take forward in the design and delivery of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) programmes.

This research report first summarises the common explanations around gender in organisations – focusing on the barriers, challenges, and double bind that women leaders face across multiple industries in the UK. Due to the high-profile and high-cost of major projects, it is appropriate that scrutiny has turned to those who lead them in the project industry. This report therefore focuses particularly on women in leadership roles in major projects and on the context-specific challenges that they may face in advancing through their careers.

The authors expand on the work that is ongoing across the sectors to assess and evaluate gender balance initiatives, offering conclusions and observations from the literature around the 'framing' of gender balance. By bringing in a gendering organisations approach from research, this review outlines a path to gender balance that 're-frames' EDI approaches to focus more on organisational culture and less on 'fixing women to fit'.

Research findings

This examination of gender balance in major projects found that the benefits of diversity are now widely accepted but the industry is slow to change, indicating that it is still not a priority. There is a prevailing problem with the STEM pipeline remaining male dominated (indeed becoming more so) but this is an issue that is not getting solved despite decades of investment. An underlying concern is that the issue of gender balance is not being approached from a 'gendering organisations' lens that understands how gender is structured through social interactions and relations of power. Major projects and the project paradigm are thought to operate in a value-free, gender-neutral environment but the literature shows us how organisations and institutions – including the project system – are highly gendered and thus reinforce gender inequality. It is this that acts as a barrier for women in progressing in their careers, and the EDI initiatives currently employed to tackle this issue tend to exacerbate gender stereotypes and rely on women seeking leadership to 'fix themselves to fit'. Many gender balance initiatives are repetitions of previously unsuccessful approaches and fail to challenge issues of power, hierarchy or masculinist cultures. The 2010 Social Value Act stipulates that major projects have a responsibility to add value and support the transformation of our society for the better – yet issues of gender and diversity are rarely understood to be part of this responsibility.

Next steps

This report establishes the evidence-base and theoretical grounding for a new inquiry into the issue of gender balance in major projects. Led by the Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment and University College London, we will be convening an action research consortium to delve deeper into these initiatives by exploring what really works and what impact gender balance could have on the future leadership of project management.

To get involved with this research programme, please contact Emily Miles. 17@ucl.ac.uk

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/infrastructure-and-projects-authority-annual-report-2018

² Calas et al. (2014)

³ Kelan, E. (2010, p. 177)

⁴ Marshall, J. (1984)