

Women are paving their way one brick at a time

National Construction Week falls in Women's month. It is aimed at promoting the construction sector and attracting new entrants, mainly women and youth

BY EULALIA SNYMAN

For the construction sector to execute the massive work expected of it within the next five years, great strides will have to be taken to retain built-environment professionals, and to attract new entrants into the sector.

It is in this light that the Department of Public Works launched National Construction Week – being held between July 27 and August 3 – which will serve as an awareness campaign to promote the image and profile of the construction industry.

The week showcases the construction sector through media awareness, competitions and special events such as the exhibition on Gauteng Infrastructure Project 2010, hosted by the Department of Public Transport, Roads and Works at the Funda Centre in Diepkloof, Soweto.

"Absolutely fantastic," says Women for Housing's (WFH) Elizabeth O'Leary, of National Construction Week. "The week sheds light on training opportunities, on how women can enter the sector, and highlights the different roles in construction: it is more than mere bricks and mortar."

WFH is a section 21 company (not for profit) focusing on linking women to opportunities, projects and resources. Training is one component of the support that WFH provides for women involved in the construction industry.

Other support includes workshops on how to develop a construction business, creation of a national database of women contractors, developing business relationships with government and private companies, and increasing

interaction between women at all levels of the sector. WFH presently boasts a database of almost 200 female sub-contractors.

"It is accepted in South Africa and internationally that women should be at the centre of housing delivery as economic participants, decision makers, and housing consumers in order to build sustainable viable settlements," says O'Leary.

Though not directly linked to Construction Week, Women for Housing has a special project called Women's Build, whereby 50 houses will be built by volunteer builders between August 14 and 18.

These houses are part of a bigger project in Orange Farm, south of Johannesburg, where Thubelisha Homes is building 4 000 houses for the Department of Housing. Volunteers will be exposed to critical aspects of construction such as bricklaying, mixing concrete and roofing.

"Besides providing much-needed housing in the area, the project provides women with the opportunity to gain practical experience," says O'Leary. "Onsite experience is crucial, and the women involved will go on to become crew leaders."

While both men and women will be working together in Women's Build, the event aims to bring attention to the increasing role of women across all sectors of the economy.

"The project commemorates the 50th anniversary of the women's march to the Union Buildings in 1956 to protest against the pass laws," O'Leary explains. "At the same time, Women's Build is celebrating the signing of the Construction and Property Charter earlier this year."

She believes the charter has been the highlight of the year as it paves the way for women's development in these industries. The charter sets goals and targets regarding ownership, enterprise development, social investment and skills development, among other things.

"The reaction of men when a woman arrives at a site is still on the negative side, but perceptions are changing," she says.

Refilwe Mosadi (24), who recently joined a construction company as a site agent, agrees. "When I arrived on site on my first day back in 2003, the men were most unco-operative and it took a few days for them to realise we were all part of a team," she says.

After completing a technical matric in 1999, Mosadi studied building and engineering at the Johannesburg Technical College. She also did a course in advanced project management, and became part of the Women for Housing network during her final year of N6 studies.

WFH helped her draft her CV and set up her first interviews. Until she found her first job, Mosadi volunteered in the WFH office, attended workshops and taking advantage of the networking opportunities offered.

Though opportunities abound in the sector, O'Leary points out that it is still a struggle for first-time entrants, especially women.

"But when I look at the women around me, the future looks bright," she adds, and relates the story of Sophy Mofokeng who is currently a sub-contractor for Group 5, who is working on the development of a new shopping centre in Katlehong.

"Last year Sophy was still a

crew leader at Women's Build and this year she is a successful entrepreneur."

Two other crew leaders, Thato Lehlokoe and Florence Siyothula, have moved on to bigger things – Lehlokoe has a contract for 100 houses with Thubelisha Homes and is the main contractor involved in the Women's Build 2006, while Siyothula has a contract with Thubelisha to build 25 houses.

"Contrary to the perception that emerging builders deliver poor quality, the work of these women has been top quality, with some of them finishing projects ahead of schedule," says O'Leary. "Women, in general, care about buildings and houses."

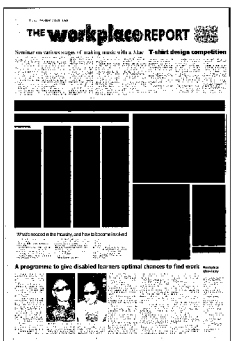
She advises those interested in construction to interact with people in the industry and consider going on internship and learnership programmes. Women – regardless of age or qualification – should tap into the Women for Housing networks and training opportunities.

Though *Workplace Report* could not obtain comment from Construction Education and Training Authority (Ceta) chief executive Teboho Thejane, O'Leary says "there is lots of work behind the scenes" at the Ceta to accelerate training in the industry.

The National Construction Week website www.ncw06.org.za contains information about careers in the sector; links to useful websites including government departments, institutes, councils and training institutions in the built environment; as well as a list of events celebrating the week.

The dedicated share-call helpline is 0860-000-629.

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WOMEN AT WORK: the number of women in the construction industry is increasing as training initiatives begin to take effect.