

# Building gender equality

UK Research and Innovation's Transforming Construction Challenge advisory group has achieved a vital and proactive 50:50 gender balance. So how is the representation of women in the construction industry growing – and what more can be done?

In 2015, women represented approximately **11% of the workforce in the construction sector**. Fast forward to 2020, and women in the UK construction industry account for 12.5% of the workforce, with only one in eight construction workers **being women**. While this slight rise is encouraging, according to the trade union GMB, it could still take **up to 200 years** to achieve gender equality in the construction sector. There is clearly more progress to be made, so what is being done?

Step forward the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF), part of the government's Industrial Strategy, the long-term plan to raise productivity and earning power in the UK. Its Transforming Construction Challenge (TCC) programme has achieved a 50:50 gender balance on its advisory group despite the sector having fewer women in the industry. With a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) from the start, the challenge was determined that its advisory group should be gender-balanced, having a female chair in Dr Diana Montgomery, chief executive of the **Construction Products Association** since 2012.



Dr Montgomery said: "My theory is that you always look for a balanced group of people. You understand what you can do and understand what you can't do, and then get all those people from all diverse backgrounds and different experiences, so you fill those gaps."

"Construction is changing, especially this side of COVID. We're moving to digitisation, robotics and artificial intelligence. It's changing not only how we do business, but it's creating opportunities that are more attractive to women."

This evolving face of construction is leading to increased evidence of stronger female representation across a construction industry that, mid-COVID and post-Brexit, needs to adapt to thrive.

Eva Magnisali is the founder of **DataForm Lab**, an architectural robotics start-up in the architecture engineering and construction (AEC) industry. She is investigating ways of bringing innovation into construction, bridging design to fabrications by using efficient digital workflows. She has witnessed some positive shifts in gender roles.

Magnisali said: "The last few decades, the preconception that construction is a male-only field has been slowly giving way to a more inclusive mentality as women have proven to be perfectly capable of handling all kinds of tasks. This is allowing more and more women to consider a career in construction. What still needs to be improved is seeing more women in leading positions in the field."

One such leading position comes in the form of Zara Riahi, founder and CEO of **Contilio**. Contilio is an AI-based analytics platform, empowering the construction industry to understand, predict and significantly improve the performance of multi-million dollar projects. Riahi sees this as the time to forge more gender balance in the construction industry as it evolves with new technology.

**Left:** Dr Diana Montgomery, chief executive of the Construction Products Association and TCC advisory group chair



Riahi said: "As far as tech goes, while venture capital (VC) investment in female-led start-ups is increasing, there is still a big bias towards all-male founding teams, particularly in hard areas such as deep tech and enterprise [only 3% of total VC goes to **women-led businesses**]."

"Yes, many VCs, corporates and governments have done a lot to create awareness, but what we need to start asking ourselves is whether the next 200th 'women in tech' or

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Dr Diana Montgomery

'female founders VC hours' event will do much to create positive change. Such change requires actions, and it's time we realised and acted upon that."

So, when it comes to actions, what about bigger construction companies? How do these organisations see the industry developing to afford even greater, lasting female representation?



**Far left:** Asha Panchal, innovation and systems engineer at Keltbray  
**Left:** Zara Riahi, CEO of Contilio  
**Below:** First meeting of the ISCF TCC advisory group  
**Below left:** Eva Magnisali, founder of DataForm Lab

Asha Panchal is innovation and systems engineer at **Keltbray**, one of the country's largest and best-known specialist engineering and construction subcontractors. Despite having only joined Keltbray in late 2018, Panchal is responsible for developing and managing a groundbreaking project funded by Innovate UK to change the way piles – deep foundation constructions – are built.

For Panchal, who believes education is a crucial factor in the role women can play in engineering, the support given by Keltbray and the wider industry has been key.

Panchal said: "Construction has typically had the reputation of being a male-dominated environment, with jobs being physically demanding. To some extent it is still male-dominated, but only because a limited number of women make the choice to join the industry."

"In current times, there is a wider range of positions available within the industry that may be more appealing to women. The mindset of managers has also shifted, so they are more socially aware and able to provide an amicable environment for women to grow and develop in. Personally, I have not felt any prejudice against women in engineering, and have always been encouraged to contribute and have felt supported by my peers."

Female representation in construction is improving. Yet with more to be done, TCC advisory group chair Dr Diana Montgomery sums up the approach now needed: "To get more women into the construction sector, we need everybody in the industry to be a bit braver and perhaps not take the comfortable, easy route."

