

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL MENTORSHIP OF WOMEN IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

T.L NKOSI¹ and S.H.P. CHIKAFALIMANI²

^{1,2}Construction Management & Quantity Surveying, Durban University of Technology, Durban, RSA.
Email: ¹thalenten@dut.ac.za, ²SamuelC@dut.ac.za

Abstract

Women remain underrepresented in the South African construction industry despite legislative and policy efforts aimed at promoting workplace equality and transformation. The literature indicates that women experience multiple barriers to career progression, including gender discrimination, male-dominated organisational cultures, limited professional networks, inadequate career-development opportunities and insufficient mentorship. This critical literature review examines recommendations for strengthening mentorship of women in the South African construction industry. Unlike conventional discussions that focus primarily on the existence of mentorship programmes, this review critically considers the organisational and institutional conditions required for mentorship to produce sustainable career outcomes. Literature on mentoring, women in construction, career development and gender inclusion was critically examined, with emphasis on South African evidence. The review proposes recommendations directed at construction organisations, professional bodies, educational institutions, government and individual professionals. The findings suggest that mentorship should be transformed from an informal and individualised activity into an institutionalised career-development mechanism. Key recommendations include establishing national and organisational mentorship frameworks, developing trained and accountable mentors, integrating mentorship with professional registration and career progression, creating cross-organisational mentoring networks, strengthening sponsorship and leadership development, integrating mentorship into university–industry partnerships, and introducing measurable accountability mechanisms. The review concludes by proposing a multi-stakeholder mentorship framework based on access, development, exposure, sponsorship, inclusion and accountability. Such an approach could strengthen the participation, retention and advancement of women in South African construction.

Keywords: Mentorship; Women; Construction Industry; Career Progression; Gender Equality; Professional Development; South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mentorship occupies a pivotal role in shaping professional trajectories, particularly in industries where women are underrepresented and may lack established support systems [Jayashree et al., 2021; Aiyetan et al., 2025]. In the context of South Africa’s construction industry, mentorship serves as both a mechanism for transmitting industry-specific knowledge and as a means of fostering confidence, resilience, and professional identity among female professionals [Aiyetan et al., 2024]. The dual role of mentorship providing technical guidance and psychosocial support has been repeatedly underscored as critical for women aiming to navigate complex workplace environments and advance in their careers [Jayashree et al., 2021].

Despite growing recognition of the value of mentorship, there remain significant gaps in the consistency, accessibility, and effectiveness of mentoring initiatives for women in

construction [Ronnie & Glaister, 2020; Muthambi & Agumba, 2023]. Many women continue to rely on informal mentoring relationships, which often perpetuate existing inequalities by favoring those already connected to influential networks [Aiyetan et al., 2025]. Furthermore, the lack of formalised and accountable mentorship structures means that the benefits of mentoring are not universally experienced, and systemic challenges such as gender bias and male-dominated organisational cultures persist [Muthambi & Agumba, 2023; Akinlolu et al., 2023]. Therefore, current research calls for a transition from sporadic and informal mentoring to structured, strategic programs that are embedded within broader organisational transformation efforts [Ronnie & Glaister, 2020; Aiyetan et al., 2024]. Such programs should not only address the developmental needs of individual women but also contribute to a more inclusive, equitable environment within the construction industry [Jayashree et al., 2021; Akinlolu et al., 2023]. By integrating mentorship with organisational policies on gender equity, leadership development, and professional advancement, the construction sector can create sustainable pathways for women's success [Aiyetan et al., 2025].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Mentorship as a Career Development Mechanism

Mentorship is widely recognised as an important mechanism for supporting individual career development, particularly during the early and transitional stages of professional careers [Aiyetan et al., 2024]. It is generally understood as a developmental relationship in which a more experienced individual provides guidance, knowledge, and support to a less experienced person [Jayashree et al., 2021]. Within the workplace, mentoring can assist individuals in understanding organisational expectations, developing professional competencies, and navigating career-related challenges [Okewole et al., 2020].



Figure 1: Mentorship as a Career Development Mechanism

Source: Researchers Own

This makes mentorship particularly relevant in the construction industry, where professional development often requires practical experience, industry knowledge, and access to established professional networks [Aiyetan et al., 2024; Akinlolu et al., 2023]. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of mentorship as a career development mechanism, highlighting both career-related and psychosocial functions [Jayashree et al., 2021].

Literature commonly distinguishes between the career-related and psychosocial functions of mentoring. Career functions include coaching, exposure and visibility, protection, challenging assignments, and sponsorship, which can assist mentees in developing their competencies and accessing career opportunities [Aiyetan et al., 2025; Jayashree et al., 2021]. Psychosocial functions, on the other hand, include counselling, friendship, acceptance, and role modelling, which can contribute to confidence, professional identity, and a sense of belonging [Okewole et al., 2020; Jayashree et al., 2021]. These functions are complementary, suggesting that effective mentorship should address both the practical requirements of career advancement and the interpersonal and psychological needs of the mentee [Aiyetan et al., 2025; Jayashree et al., 2021].

Evidence from multidisciplinary research further supports the value of mentoring for career development. Recent studies show that mentored individuals generally experience more favourable outcomes than non-mentored individuals across behavioural, attitudinal, relational, and career domains, although the effects are generally modest [Jayashree et al., 2021; Okewole et al., 2020]. This finding is important for understanding mentorship within the construction industry because it indicates that mentoring can provide meaningful benefits, but its effectiveness should not be overstated [Aiyetan et al., 2024; Muthambi & Agumba, 2023]. Mentorship is unlikely to overcome structural barriers such as gender discrimination, male-dominated workplace cultures, or unequal access to opportunities on its own [Ronnie & Glaister, 2020; Aiyetan et al., 2025]. Its effectiveness depends on the quality of the mentoring relationship, the commitment of the mentor and mentee, organisational support, and the broader environment in which mentoring takes place [; Okewole et al., 2020; Jayashree et al., 2021].

2.2 The Role of Mentorship in Advancing Women's Careers in Construction

Mentorship is particularly important for women in construction because the industry remains largely male-dominated, which can limit women's access to professional networks, information, and career opportunities [Muthambi & Agumba, 2023; Akinlolu et al., 2023]. The literature highlights structured mentorship as an important mechanism for providing women with industry knowledge, technical guidance, career advice, professional networks, confidence, and leadership support [Aiyetan et al., 2024; Jayashree et al., 2021]. Mentors can also assist women in understanding organisational processes, navigating workplace challenges, and identifying career pathways, thereby strengthening both their professional development and access to opportunities [Aiyetan et al., 2025; Ronnie & Glaister, 2020].

However, the literature indicates that having access to a mentor alone does not guarantee career advancement. Effective mentorship must provide meaningful developmental support and connect women to tangible opportunities, including challenging assignments, professional

networks, leadership responsibilities, and career progression [Aiyetan et al., 2025; Muthambi & Agumba, 2023]. Mentorship should therefore be integrated into broader organisational strategies for professional development, leadership advancement, and gender equality rather than being implemented as an isolated intervention [Ronnie & Glaister, 2020; Jayashree et al., 2021].

2.3 Critical Issues Affecting Mentorship

The literature identifies several critical issues that can influence the effectiveness of mentorship for women in the construction industry. These issues relate to access to mentoring opportunities, availability and competence of mentors, and the broader organisational environment in which mentoring takes place.

Table one below summarises the key challenges and their implications for developing more effective and inclusive mentorship programmes in construction.

Table 1: Critical Issues Affecting the Effectiveness of Mentorship for Women in the Construction Industry

Critical Issue	Discussion	Implication for Mentorship in Construction
Informality	One of the main concerns is the excessive reliance on informal mentoring. Informal mentoring often depends on personal relationships and existing professional networks. Consequently, individuals who are already well connected may have greater access to influential mentors and career Opportunities.	Construction organisations should establish formal mentorship structures that deliberately create mentoring opportunities for women who may otherwise remain outside established professional networks.
Mentor Availability	Senior construction professionals often have demanding workloads and significant organisational responsibilities. Without formal organisational recognition, mentoring may become an additional unpaid responsibility, potentially reducing the consistency and quality of mentoring relationships.	Construction companies should allocate dedicated time for mentorship and recognise mentoring as part of professional and organisational responsibilities.
Quality of Mentoring	The seniority or professional position of a mentor does not necessarily guarantee effective mentoring competence. Effective mentoring requires the ability to provide constructive feedback, developmental guidance, coaching and appropriate professional support.	Mentors should receive training in developmental communication, feedback, coaching and gender-sensitive mentoring practices to improve the quality and effectiveness of mentoring relationships.
Structural Barriers	Mentorship cannot fully compensate for structural discrimination within organisations. South African literature identifies male domination, gender bias and unfriendly workplace cultures as important barriers to women's career progression.	Mentorship should be implemented alongside broader organisational transformation initiatives addressing gender discrimination, workplace culture, equal opportunities and women's professional advancement.

Source: (Muthambi & Agumba, 2023)

The issues identified in Table 1 demonstrate that the effectiveness of mentorship depends not only on the existence of mentoring relationships but also on how these relationships are structured, supported and integrated within the organisation.

Addressing informality, mentor availability and mentoring quality while simultaneously confronting structural barriers can create more equitable and sustainable opportunities for women in construction.

Therefore, mentorship should be implemented as part of a broader organisational strategy that combines individual career development with institutional support and gender transformation.

3. REVIEW APPROACH

A critical literature review approach was adopted to examine existing peer-reviewed knowledge on mentorship and the career development of women in the construction industry (Bynum, 2015; Olofsen et al., 2017). The review considered literature on mentoring theory and workplace mentoring, as well as women's career development, gender-related barriers, professional advancement, organisational culture, and institutional interventions in construction and other male-dominated workplaces (Clutterbuck, 2005; Eby et al., 2008; Olofsen et al., 2017).

Particular attention was given to South African scholarship so that the review and resulting recommendations reflect the country's specific organisational, institutional, and socioeconomic context. For example, South African research has examined gender and race in construction professions and the role of gender in the career and psychosocial mentoring received by women in the construction industry (Bowen et al., 2008; Yokwana & Aiyetan, 2016). The latter study found no statistically significant differences in the career and psychosocial mentoring functions provided to female mentees by male versus female mentors, suggesting that cross-gender mentoring can be beneficial when the relationship is effectively managed (Yokwana & Aiyetan, 2016).

International peer-reviewed literature was also examined to strengthen the theoretical basis for understanding mentorship and to provide broader evidence on women's career development in construction. This literature identifies persistent barriers such as gender stereotyping, exclusionary workplace cultures, work–family pressures, and limited access to networks, and constrained opportunities for career progression (Olofsen et al., 2017; Curtis et al., 2022). It also identifies mentoring as a potentially valuable intervention for supporting women's inclusion, confidence, retention, and advancement in construction-related occupations (Eby et al., 2008; Curtis et al., 2022).

The literature was critically reviewed to identify recurring themes, areas of convergence, methodological limitations, and gaps in knowledge. These findings were then used to develop context-sensitive recommendations for strengthening mentorship practices and supporting the career advancement of women in the South African construction industry.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Mentorship for women in the South African construction industry should be formalised, institutionalised and linked to measurable career development outcomes. A South African Construction Mentorship Framework should establish clear standards for mentor and mentee eligibility, responsibilities, programme objectives, confidentiality, meeting requirements, monitoring and expected outcomes. Construction organisations should integrate mentorship into human-resource and talent-management systems, including onboarding, professional development, succession planning, leadership development and retention. Mentor training or accreditation should also be introduced to strengthen competencies in communication, coaching, career planning, ethics, diversity, gender sensitivity, conflict resolution and feedback. Furthermore, mentorship should be aligned with professional registration and supported through cross-organisational networks involving contractors, consultants, clients, government, professional institutions and academia.

University–industry partnerships can create a continuous development pathway from student to graduate, candidate professional, professional, manager and executive. Mentorship should also extend beyond individual career guidance to address career visibility, leadership and organisational transformation. Senior professionals should be encouraged to act as sponsors by recommending women for leadership positions, strategic projects and promotion Opportunities, thereby improving women's access to decision-makers and career opportunities.

Mentorship programmes should be connected to women's leadership development in areas such as project management, construction management, commercial management, contract management, executive management and entrepreneurship. At the organisational level, mentorship must be accompanied by measures addressing gender bias and unfriendly workplace cultures through gender-equity policies, transparent promotion processes, equitable opportunities and inclusive leadership.

Finally, organisations should evaluate mentorship based on measurable outcomes such as retention, promotion, professional registration, leadership appointments, skills development, career satisfaction, networking and increased project responsibility, ensuring that mentorship produces tangible career benefits rather than merely participation.

5. PROPOSED MULTI-STAKEHOLDER MENTORSHIP FRAMEWORK

The literature supports a multi-stakeholder mentorship framework in which responsibility for the professional development and advancement of women in construction is shared across government, professional bodies, construction organisations, universities, senior professionals and mentees. Rather than placing responsibility solely on individual mentors or mentees, the framework recognises that effective mentorship requires institutional support, professional networks, organisational resources, educational partnerships and active participation from mentees. Each stakeholder therefore contributes a distinct function, collectively creating an enabling environment for mentorship, career development, professional progression and leadership advancement.



Figure 1: Career Development Framework

Source: Researchers Own

The conceptual framework proposes that effective mentorship is achieved through the coordinated interaction of these six stakeholder levels, with government and professional institutions providing the broader enabling environment, organisations and universities providing structured opportunities and support, senior professionals providing mentorship and sponsorship, and mentees actively engaging in their own development. The framework therefore positions mentorship not as an isolated relationship but as a coordinated industry-wide intervention capable of strengthening women's participation, retention, career progression and leadership representation in the South African construction industry.

6. DISCUSSION

The critical review demonstrates that the central challenge is not simply the lack of recognition that women require support, but the difficulty of translating this recognition into sustainable organisational systems that enable meaningful career progression [Ronnie & Glaister, 2020; Aiyetan et al., 2024]. Although the literature indicates that mentorship can contribute to positive career and organisational outcomes, evidence from the South African construction context shows that women continue to experience structural and cultural barriers that cannot be addressed through mentoring alone [Muthambi & Agumba, 2023; Aiyetan et al., 2025]. This creates an important distinction between mentoring women to adapt to existing construction environments and transforming construction organisations to create environments in which women can progress [Akinlolu et al., 2023]. The former places primary responsibility on individual women, whereas the latter recognises the shared responsibility of organisations to create equitable and supportive workplaces [Jayashree et al., 2021].

Consequently, effective mentorship should pursue two complementary outcomes: developing the individual woman while simultaneously contributing to positive change within the organisational environment [Jayashree et al., 2021; Aiyetan et al., 2025]. Mentorship should therefore be integrated with organisational transformation, leadership development, professional registration, succession planning, and gender-equity strategies to ensure that mentoring contributes not only to individual development but also to sustainable gender transformation within the construction industry [Ronnie & Glaister, 2020; Aiyetan et al., 2024].

Furthermore, the literature suggests that mentorship programs are most effective when they operate within organisations that actively pursue broader transformation goals, such as inclusive workplace cultures, transparent promotion and recruitment processes, and ongoing professional development opportunities [Muthambi & Agumba, 2023; Akinlolu et al., 2023]. The integration of mentorship with these organisational strategies not only supports women's individual advancement but also helps to address systemic barriers and foster sustainable change [Jayashree et al., 2021; Ronnie & Glaister, 2020]. This dual approach is essential for ensuring that mentorship is not merely a temporary intervention, but a catalyst for long-term gender equity in the South African construction industry [Aiyetan et al., 2025].

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Construction organisations should treat mentorship as a strategic human-capital investment.

- Senior managers should be accountable for programme outcomes, while mentors should be given appropriate preparation and recognition.
- Professional institutions can play a coordinating role by creating industry-wide mentoring networks, particularly for women working in smaller organisations.
- Universities can contribute by establishing structured transition programmes connecting female construction graduates with experienced industry professionals.

These interventions would help create a continuous career-development pathway rather than fragmented mentoring interventions.

8. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should shift focus from mainly identifying barriers to rigorously evaluating the effectiveness of specific mentorship interventions within the construction industry. Longitudinal studies are particularly needed to determine whether formal mentorship predicts improved outcomes such as professional registration, promotion, retention, leadership advancement, entrepreneurial activity, career satisfaction, and professional confidence for women in construction [Aiyetan et al., 2025; Muthambi & Agumba, 2023]. Comparative research between formal and informal mentorship, as well as studies investigating whether cross-organisational or industry-wide mentoring programs produce better outcomes than organisation-specific initiatives, would provide valuable evidence for designing effective interventions [Jayashree et al., 2021; Ronnie & Glaister, 2020]. In addition, there is a need for studies that examine mentorship across different career stages and construction professions to ensure that interventions are tailored, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of women throughout their professional journeys [Akinlolu et al., 2023].

9. CONCLUSION

This critical literature review concludes that successful mentorship of women in the South African construction industry requires a shift from informal and individualised mentoring

towards structured, accountable and career-oriented systems. Key recommendations include establishing a construction mentorship framework, institutionalising mentorship within organisations, providing mentor training and recognition, linking mentorship to professional registration, developing cross-organisational mentoring networks, incorporating sponsorship, establishing leadership-development programmes, strengthening university industry partnerships, addressing workplace culture and systematically measuring mentorship outcomes. Importantly, mentorship should not be regarded as a substitute for organisational transformation, as women cannot be expected to overcome structural and cultural barriers through individual development alone. Effective mentorship must therefore operate within organisations that promote equitable access to opportunities, supportive leadership and inclusive workplace cultures. A coordinated multi-stakeholder approach involving government, professional bodies, universities, construction organisations, mentors and mentees provides a stronger foundation for sustainable change. Ultimately, the objective should extend beyond increasing women's entry into construction to ensuring that women remain, progress, assume leadership positions and contribute meaningfully to shaping the future of the South African construction industry.

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