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International Men's Day

As one of a small minority of women (circa 12%) in the construction industry, it might seem perverse that the subject of my first blog for a while is 'International Men's Day'. But while reading one of the few articles I could find about it yesterday, I was struck at what little prominence it is given, especially considering the wall-to-wall coverage International Women's Day rightly or wrongly receives. Many an erstwhile feminist might respond with the charged complaint that, 'every day is International men's day', but in an age where we are judged more immediately and severely than ever, we should be discussing and celebrating men's roles in our society, not making light of them.

Respectful coexistence

Conversations around toxic masculinity are an all-too-easy opportunity to bash men. While I am in no way defending unacceptable male behaviour, it is equally as important to have a mature and honest discussion which confronts the pressures that society, men and yes, even us women, put on men regarding their roles and behaviours. Expectations of what a 'real man' is still remain - perhaps especially in construction. If we are honest, we can see these inherent biases in the way we talk and think—be that discussing the stigma of men's mental health or a man's role in child-rearing. Celebrating men for the positive things they do and encouraging a conversation about gender-roles built on mutual respect is what I hope this article can offer.

A Woman's view of a man's world

Working as a boardroom consultant in an industry overwhelmingly populated by men has without doubt been a challenge, one which I have and will continue to speak out about. Being brutally honest, when it comes to construction, there are still some lingering attitudes from the 70's and beyond—although my experience is that these are few and far between now. I feel proud of my achievements in such an environment, but that topic is for another day. My experience has, however, afforded me a rather unique opportunity to view the behaviour and attitudes of an overwhelmingly male industry from the inside, and with an unbiased but critical eye— it's not all bad!

Celebration beats denigration

One thing I want to make clear here and now, is that this is not a knowing nod to the negativity of men, a smiling article full of back-handed compliments and off-camera eye rolls. I enjoy working with men and see many properties and characteristics in the course of my day which as a woman sometimes surprise me in a very positive way. What I have discovered though, which should be relatively obvious, but seems quite divisive to say in this day and age, is that we are all different. We should celebrate and learn from these differences positively, without a need to always segregate and confine.

I want to celebrate what men can and do contribute, and maybe try to highlight what they also have to deal with.

Men want, and deserve more

So to the positives. In an industry which has existed since man (I use the term generically—I'm sure there were a few early-adopting women builders and hunters out there in the bronze age) picked up a tool and scratched an image in a cave, construction could not have an image more dominated by stereotypical masculine tropes – the strong, the silent, rugged, gruff, unemotional, stoic, muscular, I could go on. While the entry of women into the profession has definitely addressed some of these stereotypes, there is no doubt that men are also embracing and being much more than that which those narrow characterisations portray. Men want to be more than these images portray, but it is a tough battle to stand out and go against 'the norm', especially when people's harsh judgements are themselves often borne of fear and anxiety.

I find the men I work with to be committed, dynamic and respectful and increasingly more willing to bring their vulnerability to the table when it comes to ensuring not the easiest, but the best choices are made—for the good of the job, their colleagues and indeed for society generally. These are topics which I think have weighed down men more than maybe women have appreciated, and indeed 'we' may have even contributed to, in a wider, societal sense. For every woman's anxiety with body image, being a good enough mum, being better than their male counterparts or having it all, men have different but equally awful expectations to navigate—being seen as weak, being the breadwinner, being a 'real man', being told to 'man up' and countless other, often hidden, examples that we may naively brush aside as archaic ideals.

From boys to men

For me, mental health has become the main focus for which we are failing men. As a mother to three young boys, I am acutely aware of the difficulty raising boys in a society where they are being asked to right the wrongs of long-held historic norms, without being offered the tools and education to do so. There is a strong expectation on boys and men to be better, but this can have crushing implications and ruin lives when every action and word is judged with immediate and potentially grave consequences. The behaviour and attitudes of our young men tomorrow are the product of their education and environment today.

We are all in need of support - it's time to embrace vulnerability

Men must have their own place in our society and must be championed by strong leaders and role models. I hope that if the past year has shown us anything positive, it's that it's ok to not be ok. Our stereotypes of men in the workplace need to change to become more inclusive and welcoming, to encourage all that vulnerability is not weakness, and to move away from the toxicity of the masculine stereotype within construction.

Be the change

I ask you to join me in celebrating men on International Men's Day with as much gusto and positivity as on any other day and hope we can take a step back to recognise the strength in the fabulously rich tapestry of a society which is only made stronger by diversification and embracing our differences. To remain strong in our industry, all organisations should be looking to embrace the change that diversity brings to the table, celebrating each segment with equal positivity. The seismic shift is happening, and we are all learning along the way within the industry. We should continue to augment our leadership to embrace this movement - even, and especially, when uncomfortable.