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The Exodus of Women in the Facility Management Workforce

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - The purpose of this research was to explore the state of women in the facility management workforce.

Design/methodology/approach - A survey was developed based on relevant literature and designed to collect information on facility managers' gender, age, job level, employer industry, retirement timeframe, educational attainment, and perceptions of employers' recruiting and succession planning. In 2021 an invitation to participate in the survey was sent electronically to more than 12,400 FM professionals globally, achieving a 29% response rate. The survey data were analyzed through using a combination of statistical techniques to examine whether statistically significant differences exist between the male and female survey respondents regarding factors such as geographic location, industry sector, age, job function, education level, and compensation.

Findings – Organizations are not sufficiently retaining or promoting female FM personnel, as evidenced by a significantly smaller proportion of senior-level positions being held by women compared to entry- and mid-level FM roles. This is in spite of women in FM being less interested in leaving their companies and recruited more aggressively than men. Women in FM are receiving equal or higher pay than men in similar roles. The reason for the higher pay appears unrelated to budget responsibilities, supervisory responsibilities, or years of experience. Because women in FM are not receiving lower compensation than their male peers, research needs be conducted to explore other factors that may contribute to women's underrepresentation at senior levels and differences in mobility intent.

Originality/value – The findings can support efforts to increase workforce inclusion and retention in the FM profession.

INTRODUCTION

While the paid global workforce has historically been dominated by men, and this trend has continued into the twenty-first century, an increasing percentage of women in many parts of the world have joined the workforce during the last several decades; nevertheless, just over 50% of women are in the labor force, whereas 80% of men are in the labor force (World Bank 2022). Further, gender inequality in the workplace remains prevalent (UNESCO 2000; Stamarski and

Hing 2015). Even with enhanced advocacy for gender equality in the workplace, as well as research connecting organizational performance with female representation, most women still experience challenges beyond what their male peers experience in terms of attaining career goals (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2021; Naoum et al. 2019; Jain 2022). Further, in the postpandemic era, women are leaving their jobs in record numbers, exacerbating the global underrepresentation of women in the workforce (Franczak and Margolis 2022). Although much research exists on the state of women in various regions and industries, very little research exists regarding women in facility management, a profession that is critical to the efficient operation and coordination of activities in the built environment (Bureau of Labor Statistics n.d.). As this profession has expanded and matured, its workforce has continued to be dominated by men, with no change in gender mix during the past decade (Roper 2017; Smithwick and Call 2021). The purpose of this research, therefore, was to explore the state of women in facility management, with the goal of supporting efforts to increase workforce inclusion and retention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Equality in the Global Workforce

Cultures and traditions in countries in South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East are major contributors to gender segregation (Eger et al. 2022). The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is prevalent in spite of women tending to have more educational qualifications than men do (Perrenoud et al. 2020). For example, even though equal numbers of men and women graduate from medical school, a higher percentage of men are offered residencies and leadership positions (Joseph et al. 2021; Noronha et al. 2022). Similarly, comparable numbers of men and women complete higher education degrees in biological sciences, yet women remain a minority among this field's academic scientists (Adamo 2013). Likewise, women are underrepresented in the oil and gas sector and consequently are prone to being harassed and discriminated against (Murphy et al. 2021). As another example, women in the transportation sector in Europe represent less than one-fifth of the sector's labor force (Godfrey and Bertini 2019). Seo et al. (2017) observed that despite research showing similarities in the leadership styles of men and woman, gender inequality at the executive and managerial levels occurs in many organizations: only 21% of executive positions in Australia are held by women, only 19% are held by women in United States, and only 15% are held by women in United Kingdom. Similarly, women only make up 30% of board position in Australia, 26% in the United States and 22% in the United Kingdom (Hunt et al. 2018).

In addition to blatant sexism, women face other roadblocks to workforce participation, promotion, and remuneration; these obstacles include job conditions, inadequate support systems, self-doubt, and job insecurity (Joseph et al. 2021; Schizas et al. 2022; Hansen 2020). Unsupportive workplace cultures and policies make it difficult for women to balance their work and personal responsibilities, including child and elderly care (ALobaid et al., 2020). Sharma's (2004) research on family-owned businesses shows that bureaucracies in parts of the world inhibit girls from attaining substantial positions in family businesses because of the perception that girls' primary role is to care for the home. Karthikeyani (2020) noted that prior to the 1970s, many people joined the workforce just to earn an income. Now, employees want much more from a job, including mentorship, involvement in leadership roles, flexible work schedules, supportive policies regarding maternity and post maternity leave, and child care support (Godfrey and Bertini 2019.;

Haile et al. 2016). In the coming decades, firms will become successful based in part on aligning their policies with the employees' needs and expectations (Dutta and Banerjee 2014). It is imperative for organization to adopt strategies and policies that promote equality in the professional development, involvement, and remuneration of all employees (Munir Sidani 2013). Around the world, organizations that have equitable gender representation tend to perform better financially (Hunt et al. 2018; Jain 2022). Further, workplace diversity in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity helps firms have more robust perspectives strategies and better performance (Joseph et al. 2021).

Gender Equality among Construction and Engineering Personnel

The construction and engineering workforces have traditionally been predominantly male. The National Women's Law Center (2014) reported that the percentage of women in the construction industry has remained extremely low, largely due to factors that block or discourage women from entering and staying in the field. These factors include discrimination, bias, sexual harassment and hostility, stereotypes about women's capabilities, and a lack of mentorship and networking opportunities. King-Lewis (2020) found that women in the construction industry face biases in the academic environment as well as in the workplace, disincentivizing these women from participating in the industry. Despite numerous efforts over the past several decades, the gender gap in construction and engineering continues to persists (Maurer et al. 2021).

Some areas of construction and engineering are experiencing an increase in the number of female workers. One example is the welding and electrical profession, which had very few females workers in the 1960s (Lekchiri and Kamm, 2020). From 1985 to 2007, the US construction industry experienced an 81% increase in the number of female workers. However, a significant decrease in the participation of women occurred from 2007 to 2010, owing to the elimination of more than 2.5 million construction jobs (Department of Labor Statistics, 2016). Organizations in the industry have been making concerted efforts to attract more women in order to increase workforce diversity and to address the labor shortage in the industry (Naoum et al. 2020). Companies with a diverse workforce have been found to be more productive, profitable, and have a better reputation (Hunt et al. 2018.). According to Perrenoud et al. (2020), the construction sector has made significant strides in hiring women for executive jobs, with more women currently being given consideration for advancement. Nevertheless, the industry continues to be one of the most gender unbalanced in the world (Cathrine et al. 2021). According to a 2015 Australian study, low numbers of women in the construction workforce have contributed to industry inefficiency, lack of innovation, and the labor shortage (Galea et al. 2015). Hickey and Cui (2020) reported that construction companies can have management teams that are gender diverse only if their company policies are inclusive rather than gender biased at all stages of recruiting.

Research on top construction and engineering companies indicates that women occupy less than 4% of leadership positions (Hickey and Cui, 2020). Women in leadership positions in the US construction industry appear to face similar recruitment and retention challenges as women in other locations, industries, and roles. In surveying female leaders in US construction companies, Lekchiri and Kamm (2020) found that the majority of respondents identified gender bias, limited interaction with other females, family responsibilities, the absence of role models, and uninformed career choices as hurdles to career progression among women in the construction industry. The respondents noted that many companies have policies that are gender discriminatory and promote

unfavorable stereotypes about women, have work cultures that do not foster work-life balance, and do not accommodate the zig-zag career paths of many women.

Women quit construction and engineering jobs at a higher rate than men do, compounding the challenge of low entry rates among women (Hickey and Cui, 2020). Researchers have examined potential ways to reduce the high attrition rate among women in construction and engineering roles. Smith et al. (2022) reported that firms can increase retention among female employees in the built environment by ensuring that women have opportunities similar to those of male counterparts and have access to role models. Another strategy to reduce attrition is to eliminate the wage gap between men and women who have similar job roles and education (Bilbo et al. 2014). Malone and Issa (2014) suggested that women are more likely to enter and remain in construction roles if companies offer women satisfactory responsibilities and rewards and promote work-life balance. Naoum et al. (2020) reported that women in construction jobs overwhelmingly want employment and promotion decisions to be based on merit; these women also want mentoring and support to be key aspects of their jobs. The researchers also found that female and male construction workers both want flexible work situations, fair advancement opportunities, and adequate training. While construction companies certainly play a part in implementing changes to bring about greater gender diversity, clients can also influence progress through contractual incentives and frameworks (Seidu et al. 2022).

Gender Equality in Facilities Management

Facility management (FM) is a profession with a high percentage of male workers, and this percentage has changed little over time (Call, 2022). Opoku and Lee (2022) argued, however, that compared to other construction professions, the FM profession is a model of gender equality, with equal opportunities for career growth and remuneration. Research shows that more younger women than older women are in the profession (Sullivan et al., 2010). Ling et al. (2020) identified the challenges that women in FM face, including gender prejudice, work cultures that make women feel less included than their male counterparts, uninteresting jobs with repetitive and tedious tasks, and a lack of opportunities to develop and expand skills. The recruitment and retention of women in FM might be improved by offering women greater assurance that their work has beneficial impacts and by introducing more interpersonal components to their tasks. Staffansson Pauli et al. (2020) stressed the need for the FM profession to break free from processes, policies, and standards that support gender inequality; doing so will enable new possibilities, solutions, and approaches that will further promote the profession in a gender-diverse atmosphere.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The survey used in this study was developed based on relevant literature and on previous instruments administered by the International Facility Management Association (IFMA, 2011) and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS, 2019), which address salaries, demographics, and workplace attitudes among built-environment professionals. The survey collected information on facility managers' gender, age, job level, employer industry, retirement timeframe, educational attainment, and perceptions of organizational recruiting and succession planning practices. Prior to distribution, a panel of subject-matter experts—each holding executive-level FM or human-resources roles—reviewed the survey items for relevance, clarity, and accuracy.

The finalized instrument was administered through Qualtrics. In February 2021, an invitation to participate was emailed to more than 12,400 FM professionals identified through IFMA's membership list. By April 2021, 3,557 individuals had responded (29% response rate). Of these, 831 respondents did not select a gender and were excluded from gender-based analyses. Statistical analyses included chi-square tests of homogeneity and independent-sample *t*-tests to examine gender differences across geographic regions, industry sectors, age groups, job functions, educational attainment, and compensation.

To guide the interpretation of survey results, the analysis focused on three constructs:

1. Pipeline/Progression – measured as representation by job level;
2. Mobility Intent – measured as respondents' stated interest in changing employers; and
3. Actual Attrition – defined as leaving the FM profession entirely.

The survey directly measures the first two constructs. Actual attrition is not captured in these data and is therefore not inferred.

Effect sizes were calculated to provide a clearer understanding of the magnitude of observed gender differences. Cohen's *h* was used for comparisons of proportions. Retirement-age differences between women and men produced $h = -0.14$, and mobility-intent differences yielded *h* values of –0.19 (entry), –0.27 (mid), and –0.15 (senior). Representation across the pipeline showed that women's share at the entry level was approximately 2.10 times their share at the senior level. For compensation, the point-biserial correlation derived from the reported $t(1011) = 2.709$ resulted in $r = 0.08$. These effect sizes help distinguish whether gender differences are meaningfully large or practically small, even when statistical significance is observed.

Because the study includes several statistical comparisons, there is a possibility that some significant results could occur by chance. Reporting effect sizes mitigates this risk by emphasizing the *magnitude* of differences rather than relying solely on *p*-values. In addition, multiple-testing risk was further reduced by avoiding causal claims and focusing strictly on what the survey directly measures - representation and mobility intent rather than unmeasured attrition pathways.

DATA ANALYSIS

Geography, Industry, and Age

Of the respondents, 72% were facility managers in North America, 9% were in Asia or Oceania, 6% were in the Middle East, 5% were in Europe, 5% were in Africa, and 3% were in Central American or South America. A total of 618 respondents (23%) were women, and of these respondents, 83% were in North America, 6% were in Asia or Oceania, 5% were in Europe, 3% were in Africa, 2% were in Central America or South America, and 1% were in the Middle East. Although women constitute 23% of the global FM labor force, this mix is not equal across regions: in North America, 25% of facility managers are women; in Europe, 21%; in Central American and South America, 21%; in Asia and Oceania, 18%; in Africa, 15%, and in the Middle East, 5%. Regarding the most common industry sectors, 23% of banking and investment facility managers are female, 22% in healthcare are female, 21% in education are female, and 19% in government

are female. There is not a statistical difference in gender mix based on industry, with the banking and investment sector and the government sector, $p = .221$ per the chi-square test. The female respondents were, on average, about 45 years old and were less likely to be near retirement age (> 56 years old) than were male respondents. There is a statistically significant difference between the percentage of female respondents near retirement age (20%) and the percentage of male respondents near retirement age (26%), $p < .001$ per the chi-square test.

Job Function and Level

The majority of respondents, regardless of gender, reported that managing facility operations was their primary job function. The largest percentage (70%) of female respondents focused on facility operations. Much smaller percentages of female respondents focused on real estate (7%), construction and projects (4%), and interior design and space planning (4%). The survey results also indicate that more than 30% of respondents who were in entry-level FM positions were female, 20% of respondents in mid-level positions were female, and 15% of respondents in senior-level positions were female (Fig. 1).

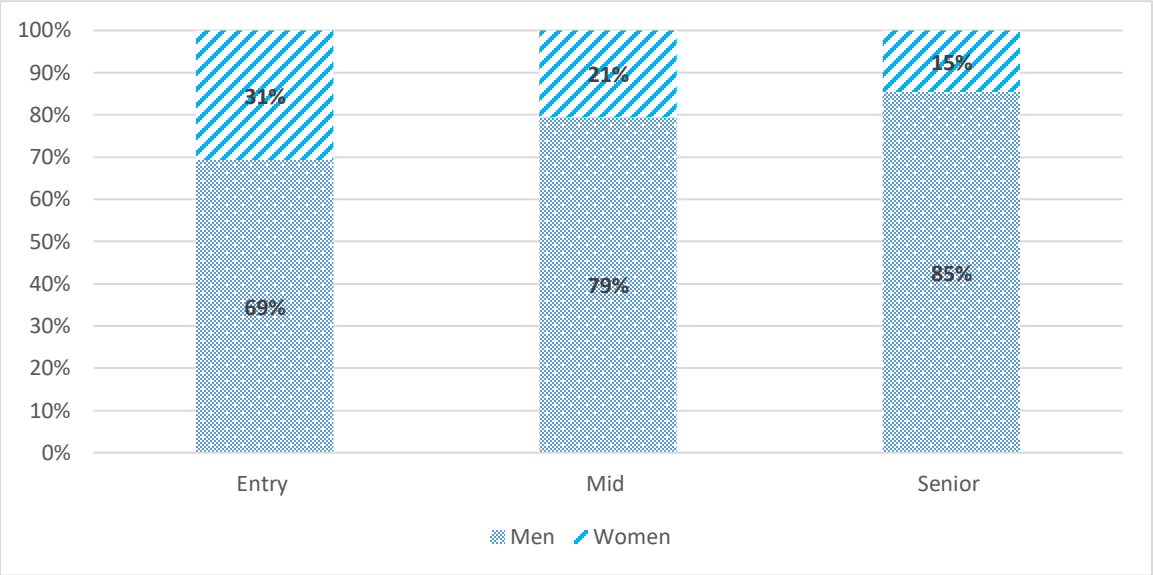

Figure 1. Percentage of male and female respondents in entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level job roles

RQ1: How does female representation vary by job level and function within FM?

H1: The proportion of women decreases with increasing job level (entry > mid > senior).

This overall pattern held regardless of respondents' primary job function. (Job levels were defined as follows: entry-level positions manage employees or act as professional specialists; mid-level positions manage supervisors who manage others; and senior-level positions manage two or more levels of supervisors.) There is a statistically significant difference between the proportion of gender mix between each job level (entry to mid and mid to senior), $p < .001$ and $p = .003$, respectively, per chi-square tests. This finding is interesting because, overall, fewer female respondents (38%) than male respondents (47%) were actually interested in changing employers (Fig. 2).

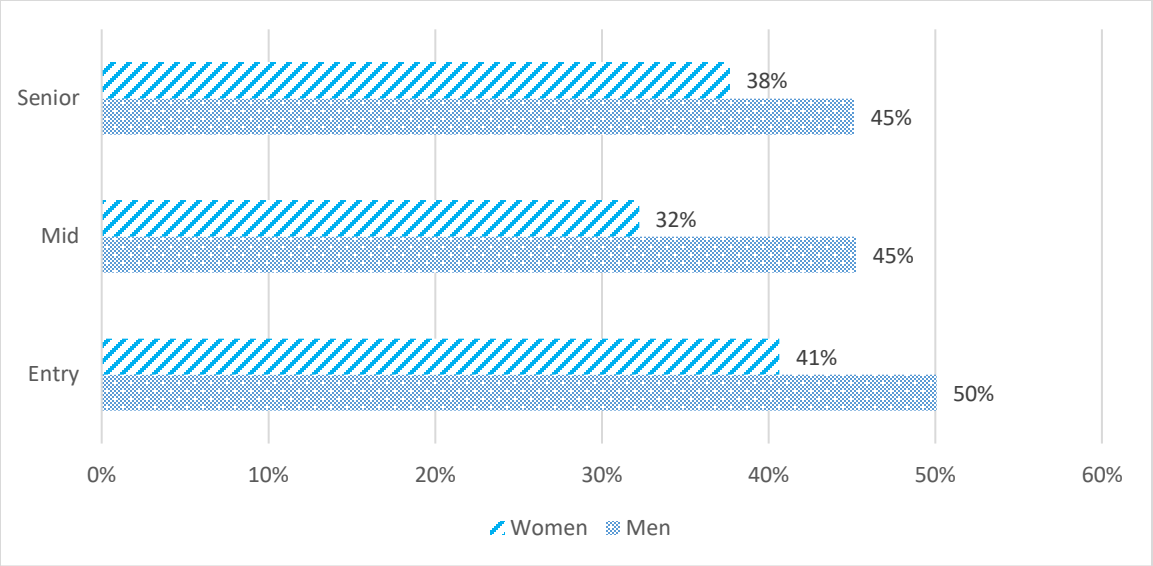

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents interested in changing employers

RQ2: Do women and men differ in mobility intent (interest in changing employers) by job level?

H2: At entry and mid levels, women report lower mobility intent than men; at senior levels, differences are smaller.

While there is a statistically significant difference between the percentages of females and males in entry-level and mid-level positions who were interested in changing employers, $p = .009$ and $p < .001$, respectively, per chi-square tests, there is not a statistically significant difference between the percentages of females and males in senior-level roles who were interested in changing employers, $p = .093$. Additional research is needed to better understand why women are leaving the FM workforce at a significantly higher rate than men are even though women overall are less interested in leaving their employers.

Education

Female and male respondents had similar levels of higher education: 46% of female respondents had bachelor's degrees and 24% had master's degrees, compared to 42% and 28% of male respondents, respectively. A fairly equal percentage of females and males majored in facility management or business management (Fig. 3). Further, similar percentages of females and males who entered FM directly after college majored in facility management or business management (Fig. 4).

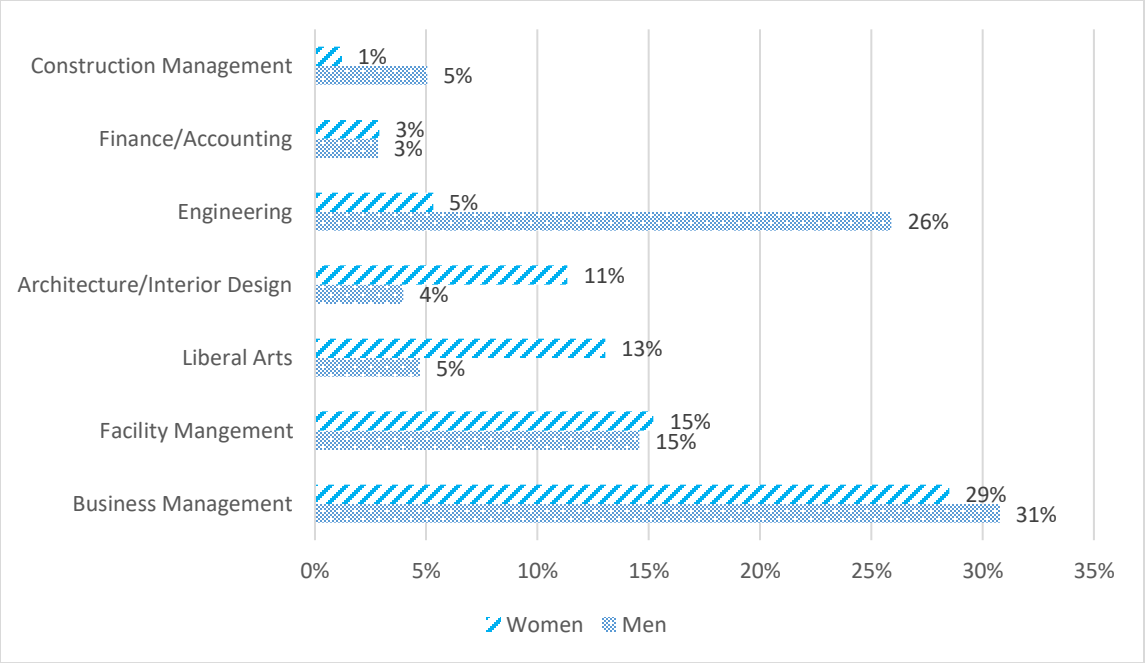

Figure 3. Majors of respondents who completed higher education

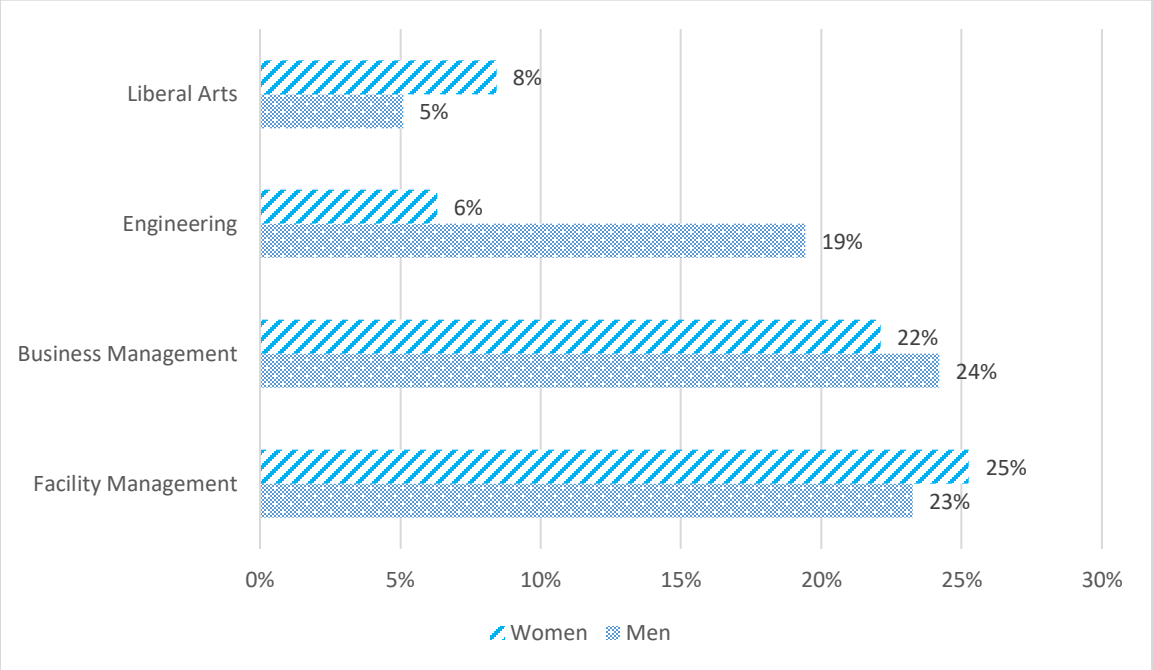

Figure 4. Majors of respondents who entered the FM industry directly after college

Compensation

Female and male respondents in entry-level and early mid-level jobs received similar wages; females in senior-level positions earned more than male peers regardless of primary work function

(Figs. 5 and 6). There is a statistically significant difference between the wages of females and males in late-mid-level and senior-level positions, $t(1,011) = 2.709$, $p = .007$. Overall, both genders received median annual pay increases of 2% and were promoted, on average, every 4 years.

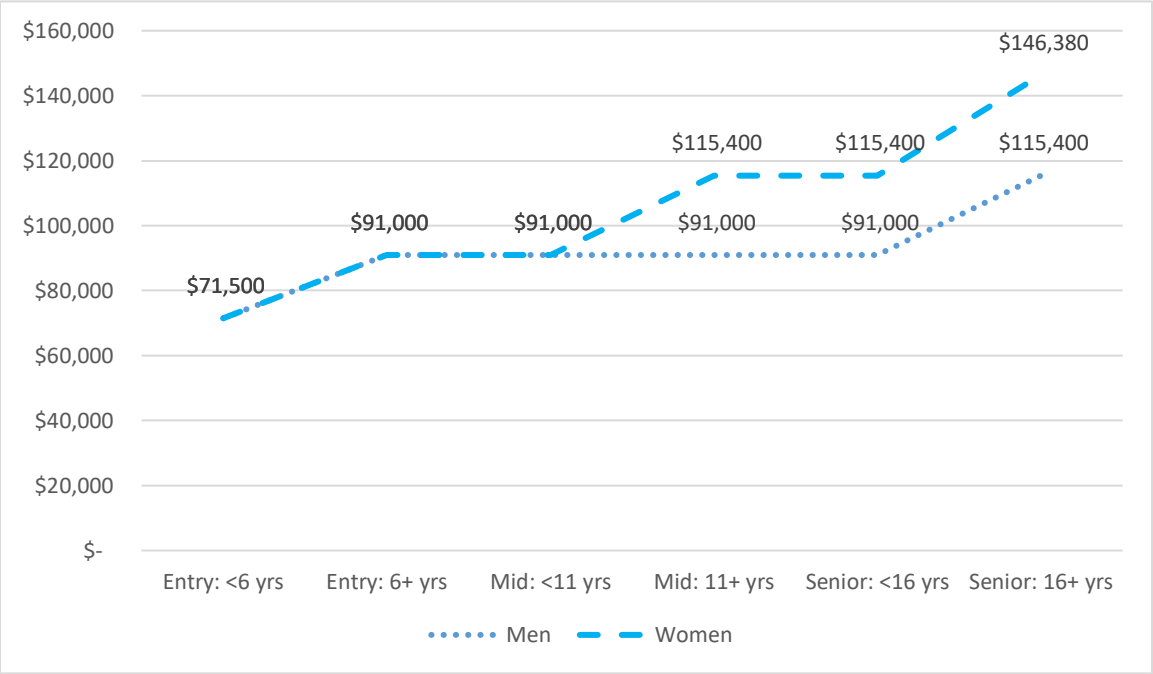

Figure 5. Median base pay of respondents

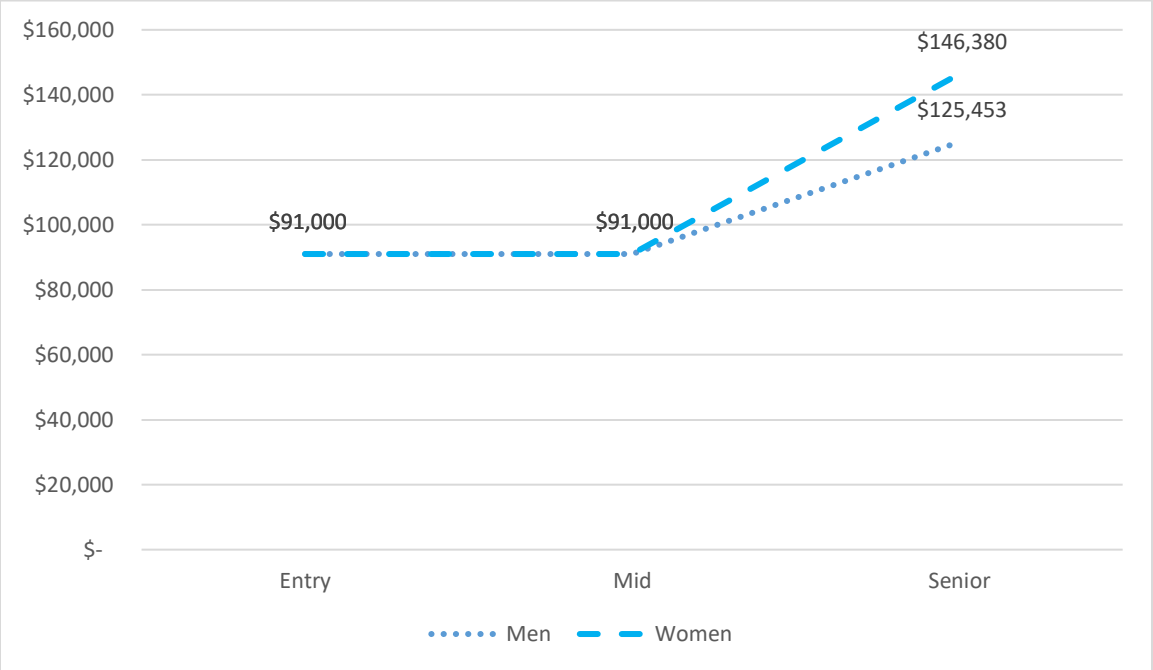

Figure 6. Median base pay of respondents in real estate and construction project management positions

RQ3: Do gender differences in compensation persist after adjusting for plausible confounders?

H3: After adjustment, compensation differences by gender are attenuated and may not be statistically significant.

Analyses were conducted to identify potential reasons for the higher pay that female senior-level respondents received. Compared to senior-level male respondents, the senior-level female respondents did not have greater budget responsibilities (Fig. 7); did not oversee larger numbers of employees (Fig. 8); had not completed more education or credentials; did not have more years of FM experience, did not work more hours; and were not more likely to work full-time, be in-house employees, or have multiple employers (Table 1). In fact, male respondents tended to have more responsibilities in areas such as budgeting and staff supervision. A potential factor contributing to the difference is that the females tended to have longer tenures in their current roles: 41% of the female senior-level respondents had been in their positions for more than 10 years, whereas 33% of male senior-level respondents had been in their positions for more than 10 years, $p = .025$ per the chi-square test.

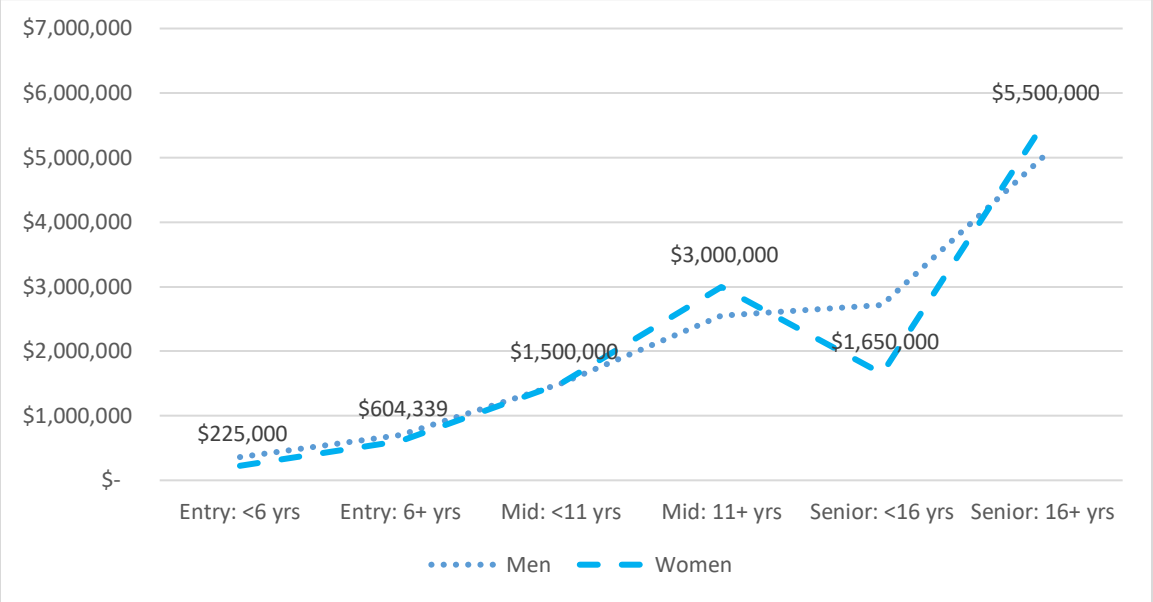

Figure 7. Respondents' median operating budget responsibilities

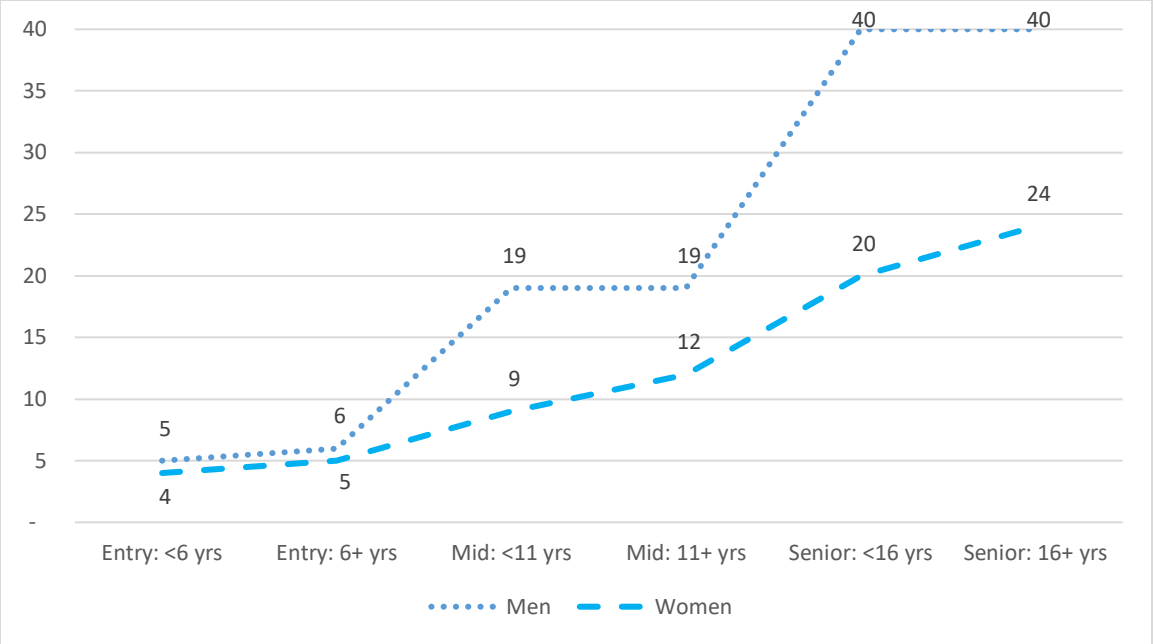

Figure 8. Respondents' median number of staff managed

Table 1. Characteristics of male and female respondents in senior-level jobs

Gender	Graduate degree	> 15 yrs. FM experience	> 10 yrs. In current job	> 10 Yrs. with previous employers	> 50 hour work week	Full-time	In-house	Multiple employers	Credentialed
Men	35%	59%	33%	21%	33%	99%	78%	6%	71%
Women	38%	57%	41%	18%	26%	99%	82%	3%	67%

Female respondents were generally more satisfied with their compensation (selecting 6–9 on a scale in which 1 = very dissatisfied and 9 = very satisfied) than were male respondents. Female respondents who had senior-level roles were the most satisfied with their compensation (Fig. 9). The higher pay that the senior-level females received may contribute to their higher level of satisfaction. The data analysis also indicates that female respondents who sought to find new employment were able to secure new jobs significantly faster than male respondents were able to (Fig. 10).

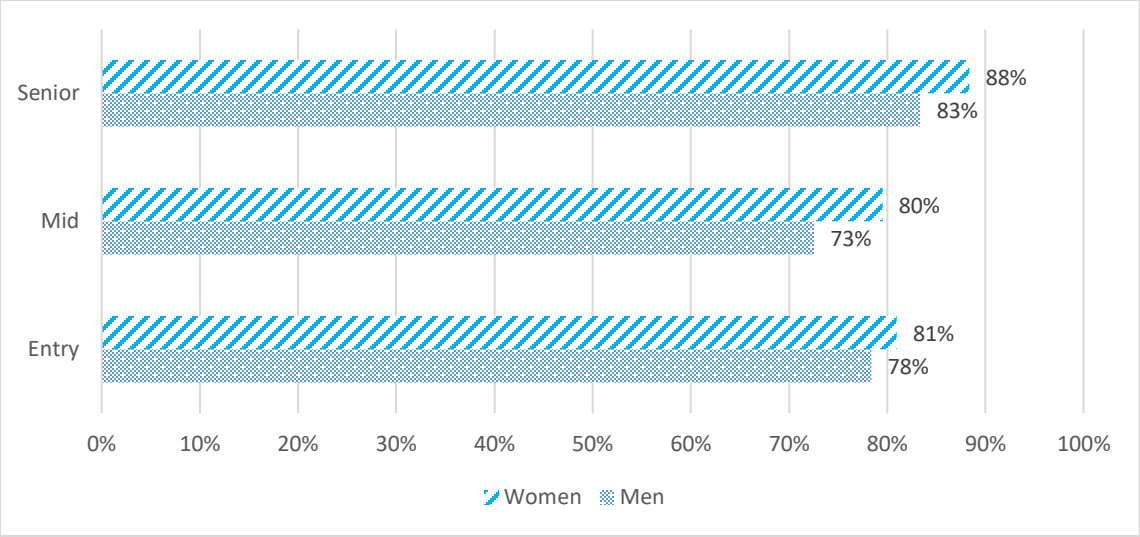

Figure 9. Percent of respondents satisfied with their compensation

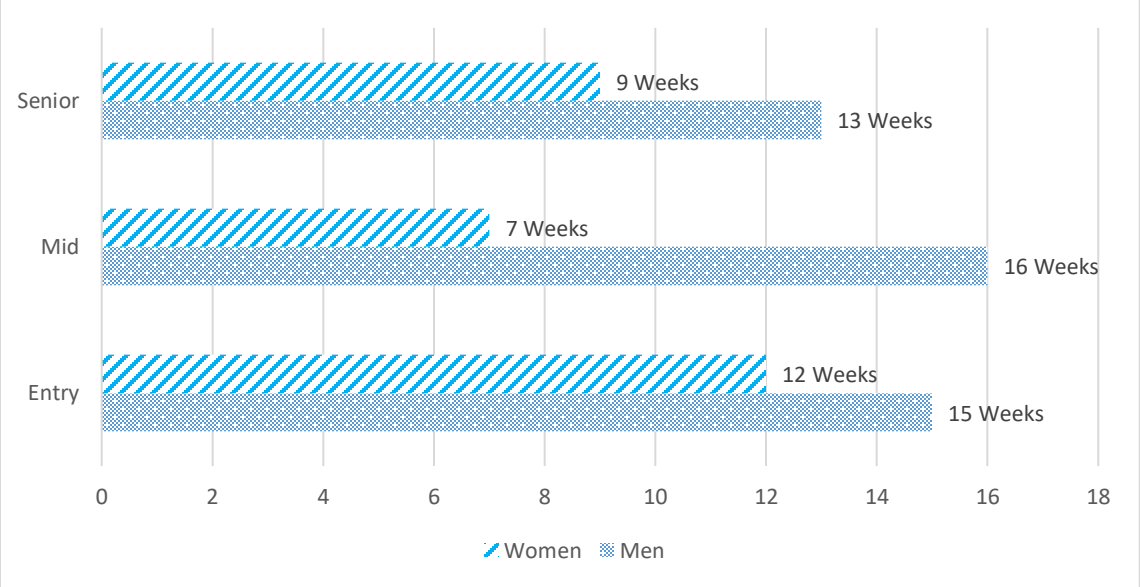

Figure 10. Number of weeks before respondents who sought new jobs found new jobs

DISCUSSION

Improving gender equality - especially by increasing the number of women in managerial positions - has significant social and organizational benefits. The diversity of thought, perspective, and leadership style that women bring to management roles can enhance financial performance and support more innovative problem-solving and decision-making, both of which are essential in today's complex and fast-changing organizational environments. From a broader social standpoint, increasing women's representation in leadership helps challenge and gradually reshape traditional gender stereotypes and workplace norms. This shift not only promotes greater equity but also creates a more inclusive environment for other underrepresented groups. Moreover, having more

women in leadership roles provides visible role models for early-career women, encouraging them to pursue and progress within related professional fields.

Despite these potential benefits, the proportion of women working in the FM profession has not changed over the past decade, and women continue to be underrepresented in senior-level positions. It is important to note that this study does not measure whether women are leaving the FM profession entirely; the survey captures representation at different levels but does not track actual exits from the field. While women in the global workforce continue to face challenges such as unconscious bias, limited flexibility, and a shortage of role models, the specific barriers faced by women in FM - and how these challenges may differ across job levels - remain unclear. To ensure that retention, advancement, and succession strategies are tailored to the unique needs of women across the FM profession, additional research is needed.

CONCLUSIONS

Women constitute a relatively small portion of the global FM workforce and, on average, are younger than their male peers. Most female FM professionals are located in North America, which also has the highest proportion of women in FM roles (25%). Across common industry sectors and FM job levels, women continue to be underrepresented, and this pattern has remained consistent over time. Despite these disparities, the educational attainment of women and men in FM is similar. Business management and facility management remain the most common degree pathways into the profession, and men and women complete these programs at comparable rates - an encouraging trend that may help strengthen the future pipeline of women entering FM.

Although women and men exhibit similar educational backgrounds, a significantly smaller proportion of senior-level FM positions are held by women compared to entry- and mid-level roles. This underrepresentation suggests that FM organizations may not be retaining or promoting female professionals at the same rate as their male counterparts. This finding is especially noteworthy because women in FM—particularly those in entry- and mid-level positions—report being *less* interested in leaving their employers, despite being actively recruited at every job level.

Compensation patterns further complicate the picture. Women in entry- and mid-level roles earn pay comparable to their male counterparts, and women in senior-level roles earn significantly higher salaries than men in similar positions. These higher salaries for women at senior levels are not explained by budget size, supervisory responsibilities, tenure, experience, or other measurable factors. Because women in FM are not receiving lower compensation than men, pay inequity does not appear to be a driver of gender disparities within the profession.

Given these patterns, further research is needed to understand the factors contributing to women's underrepresentation at senior levels and differences in mobility intent. This study does not directly measure whether women leave the FM profession altogether, so no claims about actual attrition can be made. However, prior literature suggests several potential barriers—including sexism, harassment, stereotypes about women's capabilities, limited acknowledgment and inclusiveness, inflexible work policies that fail to support family responsibilities, insufficient mentorship and female role models, constrained career development pathways, work that lacks meaningful human impact, and bias toward conventional recruitment and advancement structures. Understanding how

these factors operate within FM specifically will be essential for developing effective strategies to support the retention and advancement of women in the profession.

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