Women in Construction: Changing How the Industry Manages Risk

by Emily Martin, Saul Ewing LLP

Every year during "Women in Construction Week", the industry celebrates the growing number of women entering the construction field. Much of the conversation focuses on representation in the skilled trades and project management, but an important shift is also happening behind the scene: women are increasingly influencing how construction projects structure contracts, manage risk, and successfully resolve disputes.

Construction remains one of the least gender-diverse industries in the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women represented approximately 11% of the construction workforce in 2024, with an even smaller percentage working in field positions.[1] Yet women are steadily entering professional roles tied to project delivery—including engineering, project controls, safety management, risk management and construction law.

These roles often shape the strategic decisions that determine whether projects succeed or fail.

Risk Management Starts Long Before Groundbreaking

Modern construction projects involve complex contractual relationships among owners, contractors, subcontractors, design professionals, and lenders. Effective risk management increasingly begins long before the first shovel hits the ground. Attorneys, contract administrators, and project managers work together to allocate risk through detailed agreements governing payment structures, scheduling responsibilities, indemnification obligations, and dispute resolution procedures.

Women working in these roles are helping push the industry toward more collaborative and proactive approaches to risk allocation. Rather than focusing solely on litigation after a dispute arises, many project teams now emphasize early issue identification, documentation protocols, and structured

communication channels designed to prevent disputes from escalating. This shift reflects a broader industry trend toward risk mitigation rather than dispute reaction – this benefits the bottom line for construction companies as lower expenses means more profit

The Rising Complexity of Construction Disputes

Construction disputes have grown significantly more complex in recent years. Large-scale infrastructure projects, supply chain volatility, labor shortages, and evolving regulatory requirements have created new layers of contractual risk. According to the Arcadis Global Construction Disputes Report, the average value of construction disputes in North America reached $42.8 million, with disputes taking an average of 14.4 months to resolve.[2]

These disputes often involve overlapping claims relating to delays, productivity impacts, design changes, and payment disputes across multiple tiers of contractors and subcontractors. As these disputes grow more complicated, the professionals responsible for navigating them—including attorneys, claims consultants, and project executives—play an increasingly critical role in protecting project outcomes.

Communication as a Risk Management Tool

Many industry leaders have observed meaningful change in communication and documentation practices. Construction disputes frequently turn on the quality of project documentation: meeting minutes, change order requests, daily reports, schedule updates, and written correspondence. Effective communication practices not only improve project coordination but also create the record that impacts the outcome of many disputes.

Professionals across the industry—including a growing number of women in leadership roles—are emphasizing structured communication protocols and early dispute resolution strategies. These approaches help reduce the adversarial nature of disputes and often facilitate project teams resolving issues before they develop into formal claims. This focus on communication aligns with broader research suggesting that diverse leadership teams, including those with women, often prioritize collaboration and problem-solving strategies that strengthen organizational performance.[3]

Expanding Leadership Across the Industry

The increased presence of women in construction-related professional roles also reflects broader changes within the industry's leadership pipeline. Women are now serving as project executives, general counsel, construction managers, safety directors, and firm leaders across the construction sector. These roles place women directly at the center of decision-making related to project delivery, compliance, and risk allocation.

Industry organizations have played an important role in supporting this shift. Groups such as the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) provide mentorship opportunities, leadership training, and networking platforms designed to help women advance within the construction profession.[4] Mentorship and visibility remain critical. For many young professionals considering careers in construction, seeing women succeed in leadership roles helps demonstrate that the industry offers long-term career opportunities across a wide range of disciplines.

Workforce Challenges and Industry Opportunity

The construction industry also faces a significant workforce challenge that makes expanding participation essential. Associated Builders and Contractors estimates that the industry will need to attract more than 500,000 additional workers annually to meet current construction demand.[5] Addressing this gap will require expanding recruitment efforts across all segments of the workforce, including increasing female workforce participation.

Encouraging more women to pursue careers in construction—whether in the trades, project management, engineering, or legal roles—will strengthen the industry's talent pipeline.

Looking Ahead

In the rapidly evolving construction industry. Projects are becoming more complex, regulatory environments more demanding, and financial risks more significant. As these challenges grow, the professionals responsible for managing construction risk will continue to play a vital role in shaping project outcomes. Women entering these roles are bringing new perspectives, collaborative approaches, and leadership styles that are helping modernize how projects are managed and disputes resolved.

Women in construction are not only increasing in number—they are helping redefine how the industry approaches risk, communication, and project success.

About the Author

Emily Martin represents construction industry clients in litigation involving public and private projects. Her experience includes matters involving construction and design defects, contract and change order disputes, lien and bond claims, delays, unforeseen conditions, and out-of-scope work claims. She handles cases in both state and federal courts as well as in alternative dispute resolution settings for general contractors, engineering firms, owners, developers, subcontractors, design professionals, material suppliers, and other parties.

Citations

[1] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey: Women in Construction (2024).

[2] Arcadis, Global Construction Disputes Report 2023: The Road to Resolving Construction Disputes.

[3] McKinsey & Company, Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters (2020).

[4] National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), Industry Resources and Workforce Statistics (2024).

[5] Associated Builders and Contractors, Construction Workforce Shortage Analysis (2024).