

Pitching in for a worthy cause

When Jenny Deli applied to join the Hong Kong branch of The Lighthouse Club in the early 1990s, she had no idea it was a men-only organisation. Told she would be the only female member at the society, which provides fellowship and support to construction industry professionals, she was undeterred. "That doesn't bother me, I just want to support a good cause."

Ms Deli was referring to The Lighthouse Club's benevolent fund, a low-key yet powerful financial response distributed by the charity to those suffering as a result of construction-related accidents or illness. The club also helps raise awareness of safety on construction sites and supports a trust that provides educational support to children of construction industry workers.

As a group human resource manager for a construction firm, Ms Deli's job had required her to deal with grieving families left behind after on-site accidents. She all too frequently contacted The Lighthouse Club to secure monthly subsidies for the families. Seeing the impact the immediate funds made inspired her to join.

When she was accepted as the first woman member of the club founded in England in 1956, Ms Deli received, as all inductees did at the time, the club necktie.

Slowly, the number of women members climbed yet they never made up a substantial group, which is perhaps not surprising, considering the masculine nature of the construction industry.

"In the Lighthouse Club there is no toughness or anything. Men love the idea of having women join," Ms Deli said of how welcoming the club was to her, continuing, "Working in the construction industry is another story."

"Even in the '90s when I wanted to recruit female engineers on site I had problems. They didn't want to. Their excuse was that there were no female toilets on site."

Superstition came into play too, she remembered. "Men did not want women on construction sites due to the commonly shared superstition that women will bring bad luck to construction work, especially in tunneling work. It is not



The Women in Construction subcommittee at the WIC launch. Back, from left: Michelle Wood, Helen Dawtrey, Angela Cogman, Brooke Holden and Mira McGregor. Front, from left: Cordia Yu, WIC chairwoman Miriam Walker, guest speaker Senior Counsel Teresa Cheng, Jill Kennedy and Zoe De Courcy.

The Lighthouse Club in Hong Kong has broken new ground with the launch of its Women in Construction group, writes **Elizabeth Horscroft**

just Hong Kong, the Japanese and [other] Asian construction people have the same superstition too."

Her philosophy for 17 years of experience at union negotiations: "If we played tough then it didn't work. Macho men are gentler with women."

Fast forward to 2007 – thousands of female engineers, surveyors, lawyers, environmental managers and, of course, labourers work in Hong Kong and all Lighthouse clubs now accept and encourage women members (although Britain did so only a few years ago) to attend their monthly social meetings.

WIC's primary goal is charitable work and social, networking and educational activities

It was at one of those meetings earlier this year that newcomer Miriam Walker had an idea.

"When I attended a Lighthouse Club get-together I noticed it was all men and I felt very out of place, although I was in the same industry," she recalled.

A petite person, Ms Walker says her friends laugh when she says she works in the construction industry. "Although there are so many disciplines, everyone just assumes you're on a construction site," said Ms Walker who is the group marketing manager for BK Asia Pacific. "There are professional women out there."

Her idea was to form a woman's group to encourage more women to join. She pitched her idea to the deputy chairman for The Lighthouse Club Asia-Pacific, John Battersby, and he asked her to start it up. Soon after, the Women in Construction subcommittee was born with Ms Walker as chairwoman. The Hong Kong branch once again broke new ground as this women's group is the first of its kind at any Lighthouse

Club in the world. The seven committee members agreed that while recruiting female members was important, their primary goal would be to continue the club's charitable work through fund-raising events, and social, networking and educational activities. They also hope to address the issue of safety for women on construction sites.

"Men are invited to our events as well. It's not a breakaway group. It's an addition to the club itself," Ms Walker said. "It's all for a good cause."

That good cause is the club's benevolent fund, the reason Ms Deli joined all those years ago. Last year the club's 900 members raised about HK\$1 million for victims of construction accidents or illness, and their families.

"It takes just days for us to get the money to those who need it," said Mr Battersby, who is also Group managing director for BK Asia Pacific, at the recent launch of the Women in Construction subcommittee where they raised HK\$31,000 to aid those in need.

The assistance serves as financial "first-aid" for costs incurred by the family during their time of crisis and is in addition to any insurance payout the family is due.

The work of The Lighthouse Club

extends beyond those first few days. Scholarships are also available through the James Battersby Lighthouse Club Education Trust.

The trust is dedicated to assisting children with a parent who was injured in a construction accident to continue their education or for those young people training in the construction industry who are suffering hardship as the result of the death, injury or illness of a parent. These measures are ways for professionals to, as Mr Battersby a quantity surveyor with 40 years of experience, framed it, "... put back into the industry a little of what's been taken out".

Response to the Women in Construction group launch party was overwhelmingly positive.

"Women in Construction is a new angle in the construction industry in Hong Kong and we hope it will both offer fresh networking opportunities and extend the reach of the Lighthouse Club's charitable work," Ms Walker said.

Main sponsor WIC launch
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SEEKING SOLUTIONS TO RAISE POOR HK SAFETY RECORD

It is no secret that Hong Kong has one of the worst construction site safety records in the developed world, although experts agree that it is difficult to compare as each country defines accidents in a different way.

While the numbers that reflect safety on construction sites in Hong Kong are showing some improvement, it is still too soon to know if this is because of improved safety measures or because there are fewer construction projects in Hong Kong, resulting in fewer people on the job who could become injured. For the first quarter of this year, the Labour Department's Summary of Occupational Health and Statistics reported 668 industrial accidents and injuries in the construction sector, down from 676 during the same period last year.

The number of construction fatalities dropped from six to five last year for the same period.

Last year the construction industry recorded the highest number of fatalities and the highest accident rate among all industries in Hong Kong, according to a July 2007 report by the Labour Department, Occupational Safety and Health Statistics Bulletin.

Although there were fewer accidents than in 2005, the rate per 1,000 workers actually increased from 59.9 to 64.3, up by 7.4 per cent. While one accident is too many, it is encouraging to note that this figure is infinitely better than in 1998, when the accident rate per 1,000 workers was 247.9. That was a decrease of 74.1 per cent. Falls from scaffolding accounted for the most fatalities, the report said.

The Labour Department defines occupational injuries (including industrial accidents) as cases arising from work accidents, resulting in death or incapacity for work of more than three consecutive days, and reported under the Employees' Compensation Ordinance.

The work of registered charity The Lighthouse Club's benevolent fund addresses the immediate needs of those affected by a construction site accident and their families. Last year, the club granted HK\$1 million to needy families. Increased awareness and vigilance of the possibility of a workplace accident are imperative to lower the numbers and to save lives.

The Lighthouse Club recognises this need and has created a safety committee to address the issues of preventing construction site accidents.

Aside from the provision of safety training courses and seminars, the committee is responsible for promoting site safety and for organising the club's annual safety awards in conjunction with the Society of Registered Safety Officers. These awards include the Safe Subcontractor Awards, The Golden Helmet Award and the Lifetime Achievement Award.

These are people completely committed to safety

JOHN BATTERSBY
DEPUTY CHAIRMAN
THE LIGHTHOUSE CLUB
ASIA-PACIFIC



Each year trophies are presented to subcontractors and site foremen who have displayed exceptional service to promoting safety on their sites. The Golden Helmet Award is presented to a safety officer who has contributed the most to site safety in Hong Kong over the year, and the Lifetime Achievement Award is awarded to the person who has continually promoted safety in the Hong Kong construction industry.

"They don't do it for the award," said John Battersby, deputy chairman of The Lighthouse Club Asia-Pacific. "These are people completely committed to safety."

Whether awards and seminars will be effective in improving on-site safety remains to be seen. In November, the University of Hong Kong's (UHK) real estate and construction department, (with subsidies from the Construction Industry Institute Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Construction Association) would release the results of a 12-month research project called "Cost Effectiveness of Building Construction Safety Measures and Regime for HK", which would evaluate the effectiveness of existing measures and recommend a strategy for moving ahead, said the UHK's Dr S.W. Poon.

Elizabeth Horscroft