

Mentoring for Equality: women activists creating change in the UK aviation and aerospace industry

**Abstract submitted to the stream, Acting for Women and Equalities in Organizations?
Gender, Work and Organization Conference, June 2016, Keele, UK**

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The UK aviation and aerospace industry remains one of the most male dominated industries in the UK. While academic research has focused upon women's reluctance to enter STEM employment, their propensity to leave when they become mothers and the lack of career progression for those who remain, less focus has been placed upon what the industry needs to do to support those women who stay and/or want to progress. Unless organisations become more pro-active in ending the gender imbalance in the industry, female recruitment and retention will continue to be a problem, which will not help to address the general skills shortage in the industry. Evidence suggests that mentoring can be an important source of support for women at all stages in their careers in relation to both career advancement and general support (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014; Ehrich, 2008; Kram 1985).

This paper reports on the work of a group of female activists (professionals, employers and managers) from a number of public and private sector organisations across the industry and academics from the University of the West of England. This group of activists came together to address gender inequality in the industry and to create positive change for women (Benschop et al. 2012) through the design of a mentoring scheme, which will enable women to seek help from other women in the industry and to build their social capital through networking. The mentoring scheme is also seen as important in meeting the specific needs of women, to create a space where women feel comfortable in expressing themselves and articulating their needs in a woman-only environment and to take stock of their own circumstances before going out into mixed gender spaces. Women may feel less constrained and intimidated when not exposed to the 'male gaze (Women's Resource Centre 2007). The mentoring scheme, designed for women/by women is supported and funded by the industry partners and the ESRC. Importantly, drawing upon survey, interview and focus group data from 250 women across the industry, this unique mentoring scheme has been designed to reflect what female professionals want from mentoring, indicating that the representatives (female activists) are able to represent and address the needs of this group of under-represented female professionals (Celis 2012) and offer women the opportunity to mentor other women. Building a critical mass of women (Durbin, forthcoming; Kanter 1977) through both the project group and the mentoring scheme itself has been a central focus of this initiative.

Drawing upon feminist theory (e.g. Walby 2011; Cockburn 1991) and social capital theory (e.g. Burt, 1992; Lin, 2001) the paper will consider the role of feminist activism in bringing about positive change in an industry and organization context. It will consider the motivations and also the shared but sometimes conflicting priorities of the group of activists, how they worked with female professionals within the industry to create positive change and what women said they wanted from the mentoring scheme. Key questions addressed in the presentation include, to what extent can this feminist activist project improve the working lives of women in the industry and move us further towards gender equality? How can the scheme help women to increase their social capital and critical mass in a male dominated industry, especially in leadership positions? In what ways can an homophilous women's mentoring scheme, designed by women for women, move us further towards gender equality and gendered change within the industry?

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