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## Rail Firms Are Way Off Track On Gender Equality - But What's Next?

Posted: 01/12/2015 13:26 GMT | Updated: 24 minutes ago



A true British success story, rail is proving to be a modern and dynamic industry of which the country can be very proud.

Passenger journeys have increased two-fold over the past 18 years, employment opportunity in the sector is booming, currently growing at double the rate of GDP and it is enjoying the largest level of government investment since the Victorian era.

But it is facing a very real problem - a deficit of talent and diversity of skills - which threatens its future growth.

Over the past six months, Women in Rail has been collaborating with companies across all areas of the rail industry to provide a clearer picture of what is emerging as a significant contributor to (or at the very least agitator of) this shortage: gender imbalance.

The story we have uncovered, I suspect, will not be a surprise to most. Just 16.4 per cent of the rail industry is made up of women. In context with data across the UK economy, where 47 per cent of the workforce are female, these results represent a dangerously low figure for rail.

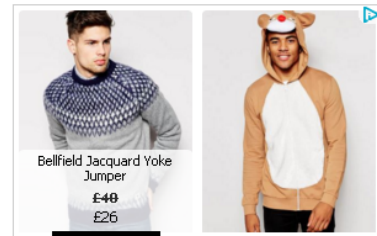
In context with a broader concern over how to fill the growing pipeline of rail jobs, these stark findings are symptomatic of a broader image problem for the industry.

But what can be done? Here are some suggestions that Women in Rail considered in its latest report:

### 1. Changing the education policy

The UK schooling system almost uniquely permits students to drop out of science, technology, engineering and maths at A-level, allowing cultural biases to take a much stronger grip on the pipeline at a much younger age.

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One option suggested by commentators is to move the current A-level system towards a structure similar to that of the international baccalaureate, which requires students to study maths and at least one science subject.

This will not only boost the pool of potential engineering candidates, but also improve the level of scientific literacy among the public in general.

## 2. Building the profile of rail and engineers in the UK

Research has shown that by the age of 7, girls have already switched off from engineering, considering it too dirty and messy.

To tackle this, we can take counsel from Sweden, where 25 per cent of engineers are female. There, engineers are revered as part of the national success story and consider themselves to be part of the elite with the likes of doctors and barristers.

To reach its true potential, the railway industry needs to become celebrated as part of the national story in the UK too. This will help to raise the profile of the career among parents and teachers, but children too - to help to sow the seed of aspiration from a young age.

## 3. Flexibility for all

To help redefine stereotypical gender roles, we need to create an environment in which both mothers and fathers can take parental leave and work flexibly, sharing caring responsibilities more equally.

In Sweden, women share a generous parental leave allocation with men, and both enjoy high flexibility around child sickness and workers being able to take the day off.

There are people of the opinion that this system is why Sweden has managed to maintain high levels of women within their STEM sector. This is because it opens the industry up to women who might typically veer towards a career that is seen as more flexible and childcare friendly, such as teaching.

## Making a difference

Though there are many adjustments that we need to make as a society, the biggest responsibility will lie with organisations within the railway sector.

After all, they have the most to gain from this shift - studies have shown time and time again that companies with a more diverse workforce are more successful. The statistics speak for themselves here: companies with more women on their boards outperform their rivals with a 42% higher return in sales, 66% higher return on invested capital and 53% higher return on equity.

Network Rail has already done some fantastic work with its diversity programme and actively raising awareness of the change that needs to occur. It pledged that by 2018, some 3,000 teenage girls at five schools in Milton Keynes - the home of the company's national centre - will receive career advice on opportunities in the rail industry.

Crossrail has made similar steps, establishing in 2013 its £13m Tunnelling and Underground Construction Academy (TUCA) designed to train the UK's future tunnelling experts. It is bound to a special objective concerned with encouraging more talented young women to the workforce.

However, there is still some way for rail to go as an industry. If you would like to help Women in Rail with its initiatives please visit <http://womeninrail.org/>, or email [womeninrail@angeltrains.co.uk](mailto:womeninrail@angeltrains.co.uk).

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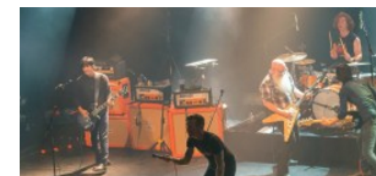
## Corrections and clarifications

● We reported the findings of a Survation poll of 1,000 British

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