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Women in Rail

Adeline Ginn, Founder of Women in Rail, Speaks to Railway-News

By Naomi Thompson



The proportion of women in the UK rail industry today is the same ratio as 1918. Women make up around 16% of the total workforce, and of this, they represent only 4% of engineers and 0.6% of executives and directors.

However, two factors – the increased attention feminist issues are receiving in the media, and the increase in spending on infrastructure and supporting education – have come about at the same time. The point at which they met was Adeline Ginn, General Counsel for Angel Trains, and founder of Women in Rail.

The Female Experience

Adeline Ginn's professional experience in the rail industry is typical of the experience of most women in the industry. She originally practised as a barrister practising family law. She describes the training she received

as helpful since it gave her universally applicable skills. However, she always had an interest in transport. Coming from a family of mercantile sailors, she completed a masters in Air & Space Law at McGill University in Quebec before joining the Bar, where she discovered that, as she observed, "crime doesn't pay when you're on the right side of the fence", so she made the decision to go in-house.

She joined a firm of solicitors in their litigation department, who sent her to Airbus Industries in Toulouse in order to assist the general council there. She found she enjoyed the experience of being part of a team and seeing a project from beginning to end. Upon her return to the UK, she wanted to carry on that way of working, ideally in transport, so she was lucky enough to land a job at Angel trains, where she has stayed for 17 years, first as counsel for international business until 2005, when she left briefly to start a family. When she returned, and

her family commitments meant she could no longer travel and so worked entirely on UK projects. In 2009 the position of General Counsel became available, she applied and was successful.

"99% of the women around me say that they got into the rail industry by accident not by choice. But once it happened, once they were in the sector, there was no chance of them leaving it, they absolutely love it. The same is for me."

Filling a Void

She founded Women in Rail in 2012 following a conversation with her male CEO who, she says, is very supportive of the cause. As he has two daughters himself, he understands how hard it can be for a woman to find her place within the corporate environment. On a business trip they were discussing the rail industry and the fact that it's male-dominated. This is not by choice, but has historical

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roots, harking back to a day when railway engineering was an exercise in brute force and dirt. This remains for many the perception of the industry.

It was about the time that the Lord Davis Report, Women on Boards, was published, which found that only 12.5% of board members of FTSE 100 companies were women in 2010. The rate of increase was slow (it would take 70 years to achieve gender balance in boardrooms at the current rate of progress), and the factors which caused it are numerous and complicated. It advised against introducing quotas in order to avoid tokenism, and instead advocated a number of other measures to combat them.

One of the problems that Ms Ginn and the Report identified, is that in the rail industry, women did not have many female peers to reach out to for support and networking opportunities. The rail industry is spread out across the country, and with a low density of women in the first place, the practicalities of meeting other women to connect with had to be overcome. So that was the original purpose of Women in Rail when it was created – to give women the opportunity to network with other women.

A Nurturing Environment

The launch of Women in Rail took place in April 2013 and was attended by women and men from all over the industry, from all grades and all roles. Initially, the group used LinkedIn to connect, networking events were organised to great success, where the issues affecting women in the industry

were discussed, and this evolved into ideas to solve them.

It might have remained an idle chat in a bar among colleagues, but for the drive, passion and competence of Ms Ginn, who said, *"I didn't have any massive plans, I was doing it out of a pure willingness to bring women together."*

Nuanced points, such as the self-confidence of women, were identified as an issue, as was an absence of opportunities to network in order to learn from other women's experiences. In response, workshops were set up, events to support women in the sector, and from these events it was evident that the gender imbalance had to be addressed at a more fundamental level.

Women in Rail work closely with an organisation called Young Railway Professionals, who run an Ambassador Programme for which volunteers go to colleges and schools to teach children and young people more about the careers available in the railway industry. Challenging perceptions in young people was a key issue to be tackled, particularly among girls.

A Network Rail survey carried out in 2015 called Switch On Switch Off found worrying misconception about careers in the railway industry. It showed school-age girls pictures of railways and engineering and found that girls between the ages of 7 and 9 described the industry as dirty and messy, girls aged 10–12 described it as physically strong and dangerous, and girls aged 12–15 thought it was unglamorous and socially isolating. The study confirmed what Ms Ginn believed. It also confirmed that school visits

by volunteers, although effective, were not large-scale enough to tackle the problem.

With this in mind, Women in Rail opened up a discourse with the Department for Transport and other like-minded organisations, reaching out to connect and work together to close the skills gap.

"The rail industry is undergoing expansion, with resources most industries would die for, billions of pounds invested in infrastructure, there's a huge wave of recruitment to replace people who are either retiring or needed to work on new projects. Parts of the country are being regenerated, new homes are being built, new jobs. You can't deliver on this project unless you have a balanced workforce."

Moving On

Along with the data provided by Lord Davis, the business case for gender parity in the industry was impossible to refute, and the conversation was very well received. With increased awareness from above, there is more attention being focused also from the ground up that there is a necessity to improve gender balance and improve the skills gap.

The situation is not much better in much of Europe. In Sweden, with gender equality promoted in the workplace, flexible working as a norm, and a higher opinion of engineering among the general public, there are marginally more women in the rail industry, but it is a global issue that girls and women do not have a high uptake of STEM subjects and STEM careers.