



A WOMAN'S WORLD

RTM's **Sacha Rowlands** reports from a panel debate where six of the industry's leading figures convened to discuss the fundamental issue of gender diversity in rail.

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Last month, on International Women's Day, the iconic St Pancras International station played host to the Rail Women Debate in an attempt to seek answers as to why the in-

dustry struggles to attract women. Is it that the industry is fundamentally unappealing to women and girls? Or are there barriers preventing women from pursuing fulfilling careers in rail?

On the panel were six inspiring women who have all achieved senior positions in the industry and have been key in smashing the idea that it's an inaccessible man's world.

Alison Munro, chair of the National College for High Speed Rail and the former managing director for HS2 Phase 2, thinks that the sector's image is a problem – as is the public's knowledge of it.

"Certainly, when I first started working in transport it was much more male-dominated than it is now, and I think that the image then of rail was worse," she told attendees. In fact, Munro revealed she didn't even want to work in rail because it was full of geeky men.

Dyan Crowther, the chief executive of HS1 Ltd and former chief operating officer for Govia Thameslink Railway, agreed that rail hasn't always been the most female-friendly

industry, harking back to a time when Network Rail didn't even have a female loo. But rail has come a long way since then, with policies in place to make it more attractive to women, such as maternity packages and opportunities for flexible working.

"In my specific company we're quite family-friendly," she said, explaining that people can come in at 10am after the school run if that's what they need, and that they are not expected to keep in touch with the office during maternity leave.

But do employees feel comfortable asking for this, even where the policies exist?

Nisrine Chartouny, project manager for Bechtel, delayed starting a family until she was in a senior role because she felt that she had to earn the right to flexible working after her children were born. She wasn't even sure whether she should return to work after becoming a mother because she could see no examples of women in senior positions who demonstrated flexible working.

Once Chartouny had plucked up the courage to ask her manager to flex her working, she

said that she was surprised when her request was granted.

She argued that senior women have a responsibility to show flexible working, and to tell others: "Have kids whenever you want, I will support you in coming back."

This was echoed by Adeline Ginn, founder of Women in Rail and general counsel at [Angel Trains](#), who said both male and female leaders should lead by example. After all, men have family commitments too, but often feel that they can't ask about flexible working.

Changing perceptions

Ginn also thinks that the industry has an image problem and that it's seen as an outdated sector, with many women entering it by accident rather than by choice. Often they don't know about the career unless someone close to them is in the industry. And, although not as alarming as perhaps it should be, she said that parents don't see it is a career for girls.

Jane Simpson, head of capital programmes at Severn Trent Water and former chief engineer for Network Rail, gets asked if she's a real engineer! According to her, engineering isn't sold properly – it needs to be explained to people early on what it is, and just how creative it can be. She gestured, for example, to the magnificent venue that was created through the coming together of different specialties.

But the fact is that when she started out in the profession women made up just 11% of the workforce – and since then, this has grown to just 13%. It takes real courage for a

young woman to be the only girl in the team, but Simpson reckons that these days more girls are looking for something different in their degrees or apprenticeships.

Crowther wants to start by looking at the supply chain, which in turn starts with schools: having career stands to tell children that the industry is about more than just driving trains, rather than solely going into schools to talk about railway safety. Her company has a workforce that is 50% female, which she claims is down to how they recruit – through mixed interview panels, the use of social media, attending careers fairs, and even having women feature on the website.

"It's about putting yourselves out there, being a bit more diverse than other companies, not wearing orange jackets and hard hats – that helps – and changing the narratives," she told me.

Quotas and targets

Network Rail has committed to increasing its female workforce to 20% by 2020. So are quotas the best way to address the gender imbalance?

Crowther thinks not: "I remember when British Rail introduced gender targets and that was a nightmare – an absolute nightmare. It was very difficult for women in the industry at that time, in the sense of being seen to get a role on the basis of their own ability and credibility." Instead, she wants to see the creation of an environment where women actually want to work.

On the other hand, Chartouny, who used

to believe that quotas didn't work and that people wouldn't want to get a job that way, said that she has since changed her mind. The goal is to get one million women into STEM subjects by 2020, but it's not doable. She argued that what the industry is currently doing does work, but that it's doing it too slowly.

Munro drew a distinction between quotas and targets, with targets sending out a clear message about the aspiration to attract more women, but candidates still being awarded jobs based on merit. She wants to see women being encouraged to put themselves forward for positions, given opportunities, and mentored.

Another panelist, Claire Magee, head of HR at Hitachi Rail Europe, warned that quotas are concerning from a fairness perspective. However, Ginn argued that without quotas it would take 70 years to meet the targets in place.

In stark contrast to the lingering myth that currently affects the industry from the outside, of the six women that made up the panel, just two are engineers. These high-ranking women all agree that as well as encouraging women into engineering, the industry needs to showcase the varied opportunities it holds.

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