

ITC-SA profiles three women in roofing who've climbed the scaffolding

The Institute for Timber Construction South Africa (ITC-SA), the SA body and regulator of the engineered timber structure industry, marks Women's Month by putting the spotlight on three of its female members who share their experiences as women in construction.



While the South African construction sector is a provider of a significant number of jobs and fertile ground for entrepreneurial activities, female representation across all strata in the sector is fundamentally lacking. According to the [National Home Builders Registration Council's \(NHBRC\) Women Empowerment Programme website](#), "Participation by women in the construction industry remains low. Support for women-owned construction businesses is now a matter of urgency."

Even so, and thanks to empowerment programmes such as the NHBRC's, women are entering – and making it in – the South African construction sector. The timber roof truss industry bears no exception.

Jewel Kreutzfeldt, national engineering manager, MiTek Industries SA

Kreutzfeldt is an engineering member of the ITC-SA. She studied civil engineering at Witwatersrand Technikon and has worked in the roofing industry for the past 27 years.

With an engineering background, Kreutzfeldt has an affinity for the complex: “I love to solve problems relating to intricate roofs and to work out how to best frame them,” she says. But her entry into the sector did not come without its own difficulties.

“In the beginning of my career, a particular challenge I faced was having to prove to contractors that I knew what I was talking about. Many of them had been in the industry for longer than I had (and loved to tell me so). So, as a woman in a traditionally male environment, earning their respect took some time,” she says. “But having been in the game for so long, people now know who I am at MiTek and I don’t need to prove myself. I enjoy a great deal of respect from my customers and the people with whom I work.”

Susan Hair, roof designer, Mustbuild

Hair has been in the roofing industry for 30 years. “I was employed to do the invoices, but this only took the morning to complete, so I watched the designers at work and started doing quotes as well,” says Hair, whose passion for her work has to do with “the variety; the quotes, design and site visits. No two buildings are the same and I enjoy working on the design of a complex roof that really makes you think. I love what I do and this carries over to the people I meet.”

Remarking on her experience as a woman in the construction sector, she says, “I once encountered a builder who refused to speak to me because I was a woman. You have to work much harder to be accepted in a predominantly male industry such as this; you have to climb the scaffolding to be taken seriously.”

“Construction has always been a male-dominated arena, but if a woman is good at what she does and works hard, she will go far. While the scales of gender balance do need redressing, everyone ultimately must start from the bottom, but in my experience women need to be more tactical about this; they need to make sure they are in the right place and business for themselves, then work their way up.”

Eldré Ludick, owner, Trussco

Ludick, owner of Blazecor 48 CC trading as Trussco, has been active in the roofing industry since 1997. She joined her then-husband, who was already in the construction sector, to start a building material supply company in Maseru. “There was a demand for roofing in Lesotho, so I decided to start a roof factory as an add-on service to our building materials supply company,” she remarks. “It was never my ambition to be in the construction industry, but I saw a business opportunity and took advantage of it.”

At the time of starting the business in Lesotho, there were not many women in the industry, which was challenging for Ludick in terms of employee management and the day-to-day running of her business. “As a woman, it was uniquely challenging to earn the respect of my employees, so I had to draw a fine line between leadership and understanding; on being firm, but fair,” she says.

“In the beginning, building relationships with our suppliers and financial institutions was difficult, because the primary assumption at the time was that women were not career-driven, especially in the construction sector, but I’ve built solid relationships with my suppliers and clients, and have earned my place in the construction sector,” she adds.

Other challenges Ludick has faced over the years have included accessing qualified artisans, especially due to her business being located in a rural area. “But we’ve established good relationships with local roof erectors that have the necessary training and have proven themselves highly capable; we’re happy to report that we’ve relied on the same team for the past four years,” she says, adding, “We’ve also had to contend with a market resistant to using prefabricated roof trusses, despite the fact that using site-made trusses without engineering is a dangerous practice, but we have made headway in educating our clients about the many advantages of prefabricated timber roof trusses.”

Fair, encouraging and caring approach

For Ludick, being a woman in construction has its benefits. “As a woman, I’ve always been motivated to go the extra mile to prove myself and to be taken seriously in the construction sector, and the extra mile can teach you a lot about yourself. In the early years, I adopted an aggressive approach towards business, but learned quickly that a fair, encouraging and caring approach was far more productive,” she notes, adding, “To show kindness does not mean you are weak or incapable. On the contrary, it earns you more respect with clients and employees.”

While Ludick's is a success story, she maintains that there is still much to be done to make the local construction sector more diverse and balanced. “The construction sector needs to be promoted as a viable trade for women to enter into. Men/women ratios in the construction industry need to start striking more of a balance, not only in numbers, but in terms of pay and opportunities as well,” she says, concluding, “Educational institutions have a great opportunity on their hands to market and shape the possibilities for women in construction, and financial institutions can benefit from making financial assistance more accessible to female entrepreneurs.”

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