Shifting Gears and Lifting Careers: Women in the Lift Industry

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Abstract. Women in the lift and escalator industry represent a small share of the technical, engineering, and leadership workforce. The numbers are growing, but together as an industry we can do more to ensure women enter, stay, and thrive in the sector.

This paper takes a closer look at the experiences behind the numbers, drawing on industry practices and conversations with women working in lift engineering.

Looking at lessons from diversity efforts in related technical fields, the study brings forward themes that many will recognise - limited early exposure to engineering pathways, reports of being discouraged from pursuing mechanical trades during school career guidance sessions, and few visible female role models who show what is possible.

Alongside these challenges, the paper also highlights what is working. Targeted outreach, inclusive apprenticeship routes, supportive mentorship networks, and thoughtful improvements to workplace culture are already making a positive difference.

With practical recommendations for employers, educators, and industry bodies, this research aims to help build a sector where women feel welcomed, supported, and able to progress with confidence. For example, employers can implement mentorship programs pairing new female hires with experienced professionals, while educators can introduce engineering modules tailored to young women.

Encouraging greater female participation is not just about fairness. It strengthens innovation, supports long-term skills growth, and helps the industry meet the evolving needs of the built environment.

A more balanced workforce is not just a goal; it is an opportunity for the industry to grow in a way that benefits everyone.

1 INTRODUCTION

The lift and escalator industry is central to the functioning of places and spaces globally. As buildings grow taller, infrastructure becomes more complex, and end-user and societal expectations in terms of access and egress – including for disabled people – change, the demand for skilled engineers and technicians continues to rise. Despite this demand, which is likely to increase going forward, women remain significantly under-represented across technical, engineering, and leadership roles. This imbalance mirrors wider trends in mechanical and electrical engineering, where women constitute only 16.5% of the UK engineering workforce [1].

Although the number of women entering the lift industry is gradually increasing, statistical and visible change has not been significant. The sector is at a critical juncture: it must expand its talent pipeline, address skills shortages, and adapt to technological change. Encouraging more women to enter, stay, and progress within the industry does not only relate to equity but is also a strategic necessity to ensure the industry can continue to respond to demand going forward. This paper examines the experiences behind the statistics, drawing on industry conversations, comparative research, and emerging best practice. It highlights some of the barriers women experience, initiatives that are working, and opportunities for collective action.

2 EARLY INFLUENCES AND THE FORMATION OF CAREER PATHWAYS

2.1 Gendered expectations in schooling

Women's under-representation in lift engineering often begins long before they enter the workforce. Interviews with female engineers reveal that early exposure to engineering pathways is limited, and gendered assumptions frequently shape career guidance. Many women recall being subtly discouraged from pursuing mechanical trades during school, with teachers or advisers suggesting "more suitable" careers. These experiences reflect broader STEM patterns: girls' interest in engineering peaks between the ages of 11 and 14, but declines sharply when they encounter stereotypes about who belongs in technical fields [2].

Career guidance practices often reinforce these patterns. Engineering UK [3] reports that girls are less likely than boys to receive information about apprenticeships or technical careers and more likely to be directed toward traditionally feminine sectors such as health or education. Without early exposure to engineering tasks or relatable role models, many young women simply never consider lift engineering as a viable option.

2.2 The importance of early hands-on experience

Practical engagement plays a crucial role in shaping career aspirations. Research from the Royal Academy of Engineering [4] highlights that hands-on activities – such as dismantling mechanical systems, coding workshops, or engineering challenges – significantly increase girls' confidence and interest in STEM. In the lift industry, opportunities for early engagement remain limited, but targeted outreach programmes are beginning to address this gap. Companies that offer school visits, interactive demonstrations, or taster days report higher engagement from female students.

3 REPRESENTATION AND VISIBILITY IN THE INDUSTRY

3.1 The impact of role models

Visibility is a powerful driver of inclusion. Women entering the lift industry frequently report being the only female engineer in their team or region, which can heighten feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging, as well as a sense of being othered within the profession. This aligns with findings from the Women's Engineering Society (WES) [5], which emphasises that the absence of visible female role models contributes to lower recruitment and retention. Conversely, when women see others thriving in technical roles, their sense of belonging increases. Industry outreach events that feature female engineers consistently attract higher engagement from girls and young women [6].

Representation also helps challenge persistent stereotypes about physical capability or technical competence. To illustrate these stereotypes, the following anonymised statements have been reported within the industry and wider engineering contexts:

- "This job can be quite physical – are you sure you'll manage the heavier tasks?"
- "Lift fault-finding is very technical; it might be too complex if you haven't done hands-on engineering before."
- "Customers might prefer dealing with a male engineer on site."
- "Women don't usually stay long in this kind of role – it's demanding."
- "You might struggle with some of the tools; they're designed for people with more strength."

Modern lift engineering has evolved significantly with the introduction of advanced diagnostic tools, remote monitoring, and digital systems. These innovations have reduced the physical demands traditionally associated with the role, making outdated assumptions about who can or cannot do the

job increasingly irrelevant. Today, the industry recognises that effective lift engineering is driven by technical insight, problem-solving, and collaborative working practices rather than physical strength.

3.2 Challenging stereotypes through visibility

Public-facing campaigns, case studies, and media features should highlight not only women's achievements but also women carrying out everyday roles across the lift industry. Showcasing women in routine technical, operational, and leadership positions helps normalise their presence, challenge outdated stereotypes, and reshape perceptions of who belongs in the sector. This kind of visible, day-to-day representation is particularly influential for younger people forming their first impressions of engineering careers and looking for relatable role models.

4 BARRIERS WITHIN THE WORKPLACE

4.1 Cultural and structural challenges

Women who enter the lift and escalator industry often encounter workplace cultural norms, barriers and/or perceived barriers to inclusion and belonging, which have been shaped and informed (likely unconsciously) by a long-standing male-dominated workforce. Commonly experienced barriers include:

- Being the only woman in a team, leading to feelings of increased scrutiny or focus on one's work due to the novelty of difference.
- Potentially more limited access to traditionally male-dominated informal networks (which women have not been a part of in the past) where opportunities and knowledge circulate.
- Subtle and unconscious biases that can inadvertently steer or encourage women toward administrative or "lighter" tasks rather than complex technical work.
- Workplace banter or behaviours that can unintentionally result in women feeling unwelcome, undermined or undervalued.

These experiences reflect broader patterns in engineering workplaces [7]. While overt discrimination has declined, micro-exclusions and assumptions about gender roles persist. Women may be overlooked for advanced technical training or complex assignments that would build experience, slowing their progression.

4.2 Retention and progression barriers

Retention is a significant challenge. Research from the Institute of Engineering and Technology (IET) [8] shows that women in engineering are more likely than men to leave the profession within the first five years, often citing lack of progression, limited support, or unsupportive culture. In the lift industry, similar themes emerge: women report fewer opportunities for advanced technical training, slower promotion pathways, and limited visibility of women in senior leadership.

5 WHAT IS WORKING: EMERGING GOOD PRACTICE

5.1 Targeted outreach and school engagement

Several lift companies and industry bodies have begun implementing outreach programmes aimed at girls aged 11-16. These initiatives include school visits, engineering workshops, and interactive demonstrations of lift systems. Evidence from STEM Learning UK [9] suggests that such interventions significantly increase girls' interest in engineering careers, particularly when delivered by female engineers.

5.2 Inclusive apprenticeship pathways

Apprenticeships remain a key entry route into the lift industry, and employers who have reviewed and updated their recruitment materials, interview processes, and outreach strategies are reporting increased applications from women. These reviews typically include auditing job descriptions for gendered or overly physical language, replacing stereotypical imagery with photos of women carrying out everyday technical tasks, and providing clearer explanations of modern diagnostic tools and remote-monitoring work to demystify the role. Employers are also refining interview questions to focus on problem-solving and technical curiosity rather than prior hands-on experience, offering flexible working options where possible, and strengthening outreach through school partnerships, taster days, and pre-apprenticeship sessions. Research shows that these practical steps – alongside gender-neutral language and transparent descriptions of day-to-day tasks – can significantly broaden the applicant pool [10].

Some organisations have gone further by introducing pre-apprenticeship programmes designed to build confidence and foundational skills for individuals who may not have had prior technical experience. These programmes mirror successful models used in construction and rail engineering and provide a supported, practical pathway into the industry.

5.3 Mentorship and peer support networks

Mentorship is consistently identified as one of the most effective tools for retention and progression. Pairing new female hires with experienced engineers provides guidance, reassurance, and a safe space to discuss challenges. Industry-wide networks – such as WES, LEIA's Women in Lifts initiative, and cross-sector engineering forums – help women build community and share best practice.

5.4 Improving workplace culture

Cultural change is essential for long-term progress. Employers who invest in inclusive leadership training, clear anti-harassment policies, and transparent progression pathways report higher satisfaction among female staff [11]. Practical, organisation-led improvements also play a significant role in creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment. These include ensuring PPE is available in designs and sizes that accommodate women, reviewing shift patterns to offer greater flexibility, and providing facilities that meet the needs of all employees, including women. By addressing these structural and environmental barriers – rather than placing responsibility on individuals – employers can foster workplaces where women feel supported, valued, and able to thrive.

5.5 Celebrating success and visibility

Showcasing the achievements of women in the lift industry – alongside visible examples of women carrying out and enjoying day-to-day technical and operational roles – helps shift perceptions, normalises women's presence in the sector, and inspires future talent. Case studies, award nominations, and internal communications that highlight both everyday contributions and individual successes reinforce the message that women belong in technical and leadership roles without needing to exceed their male counterparts to be recognised. This balanced approach to visibility supports cultural change and provides relatable role models for those considering a career in the industry.

6 THE STRATEGIC CASE FOR GENDER DIVERSITY

6.1 Innovation and problem-solving

Diverse teams outperform homogeneous teams because they bring a wider range of lived experiences, communication styles, and problem-solving approaches. In the lift industry, women often contribute perspectives shaped by customer interaction, accessibility considerations, and user-centred thinking

– all of which can influence system design, fault diagnosis, and service delivery. Research shows that mixed-gender teams are more likely to challenge assumptions, identify risks earlier, and generate creative solutions [12].

6.2 Addressing skills shortages

With experienced engineers retiring and demand for vertical transportation increasing, the industry cannot rely on traditional recruitment pools alone. Women represent a large, under-utilised talent pipeline. Broadening participation strengthens workforce resilience, supports succession planning, and ensures the industry can meet future demand.

6.3 Aligning with client and public expectations

Clients and regulators increasingly assess organisations on their commitment to diversity and inclusion. A visibly balanced workforce enhances credibility, supports tender processes, and aligns with public expectations around equality. Demonstrating progress in gender representation can therefore strengthen commercial relationships and industry reputation.

7 CONCLUSION: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

The lift and escalator industry is well positioned to become a sectoral leader in advancing gender inclusion within engineering. Evidence of progress is already emerging through targeted outreach initiatives, more inclusive apprenticeship pathways, strengthened mentorship networks, and the cultural and attitudinal shifts taking place across organisations. Nonetheless, sustained and coordinated action is required to accelerate this trajectory. Employers must continue to refine recruitment and retention practices; educators must ensure that engineering pathways remain accessible and free from gendered barriers; and industry bodies must promote, monitor, and disseminate best practice across the sector.

It is important to recognise that meaningful change will take time. Gendered assumptions and expectations begin forming in early childhood, and shifts in these norms may take a generation to be fully reflected in workforce representation statistics. A more gender-balanced industry therefore represents not only an ethical imperative but a strategic opportunity. By committing to long-term, systemic change, the sector can cultivate an environment in which women enter, remain, and progress with confidence, contributing to a more resilient, innovative, and future-ready workforce.

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BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS



Gemma Moore is an Account Manager at Dewhurst Ltd, where she manages a portfolio of key clients and supports the delivery of tailored lift solutions across the UK. She holds a BA in International Marketing and a BA in Business Management from Teesside University. With over eight years of experience in technical sales and customer relationship management, she plays a central role in driving new business development and ensuring long-term client satisfaction. Gemma brings a customer-focused approach to the lift industry, with a strong emphasis on service excellence, market insight, and collaborative growth.