



## CIHT Dubai Online Seminar – Bulletin

Michelle Wood (PTRC), Jodie Mairs (Independent Consultant), Brindha Sankari (Arup), Nebras Radaideh (Parsons), Yara al Hamden (Aecom)

My Journey - Perspectives on International Women in Engineering Day

### About the Event

International Women in Engineering Day (INWED) is an international awareness campaign which raises the profile of women in engineering and focuses attention on the amazing career opportunities available to women and girls in this exciting industry. In 2021, INWED is celebrating its 8th year with the theme of 'Engineering Heroes' to celebrate the work that women around the world are doing not just to respond to the pandemic, but also to support lives, livelihoods, and communities every day.



CIHT Dubai was proud to support INWED with this online seminar focused on women pursuing careers in the highways and transportation sector in the UAE. The theme of the seminar was 'My Journey' where a panel of four women, at different stages of their career, related what influenced their academic, career and life choices, described their current roles and responsibilities as well as the challenges, concerns, and opportunities they have encountered along the way. They shared experiences and thoughts about how professional women in the sector can meet and balance choices along the way.

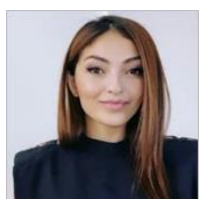
### The Panel

Our panel was chaired by **Michelle Wood**, Head of Technical Development at PTRC Training, UK. Michelle has over 30 years' experience as a transport planner in UK and internationally. She is a Chartered Transport Planning Professional, reviewer and mentor for the TPP qualification and leads Professional Development for CIHT Dubai.



**Jodie Mairs** has over 20 years' experience working in the UK and Middle East as a Road Safety Specialist and Transportation Planner. Jodie brings a wealth of experience in road safety, having audited a variety of projects including safer routes to schools, local safety schemes, master plans, local roads, and expressways. Jodie also brings experience in road safety strategy, drafting and prioritising programmes and leading public engagement events. She is a Member of the Committee of CIHT Dubai.

**Brindha Sankari Vasudevan** is a Senior Transport Planner with over 14 years of experience in UAE, Singapore and India. She is an expert in transport planning and strategic modelling, business case assessment, economic assessments, rail studies, transport assessment, and feasibility studies. Brindha also has experience in big data analysis and data visualisation to create dashboards, interactive maps using software such as PowerBI for a variety of planning disciplines. She is the Web and Data Officer of the Committee of CIHT Dubai.



**Nebras Radaideh** has over 11 years' experience, currently as a project control specialist and risks engineer with Parsons International and is the Events Coordinator for CIHT Dubai. During her career, she has worked on Route 2020 of Dubai Metro with Systra, a major international engineering and consulting group. Nebras graduated as a civil engineer from Jordan in 2010, holds PMP and RMP Certificates and has worked in the construction sector for four years, followed by six years in the railway industry, latterly in the UAE.

**Yara Al Hamdan** is a recent graduate into the highways and transport sector and has two years' experience in the UAE. She is currently a transport planner and works within the Strategic Planning & Advisory team within AECOM. Her main areas of specialty are GIS and pedestrian modelling. She has also worked extensively on parking strategies, traffic impact studies and smart city initiatives. Yara is a Member of the Committee of CIHT Dubai, leading initiatives around Young Professionals.



## Panel Discussion

**Michelle** began the panel discussion by asking everybody to recount their personal journey through their academic studies and how they developed their career path in transport. She asked each member to think about the challenges they faced and how these were overcome.

**Jodie** started off and told her story about how she accidentally fell into the world of transport planning. Jodie is not an engineer, but a geography graduate, and after graduating didn't know which career path to take. Her mother encouraged her to attend a careers open day and to visit the Babcie stand. After speaking with Babcie's transport planners Jodie signed up for their graduate programme and gained a wide understanding of the business and the different disciplines that make up the transport industry. After five years Jodie moved to Faber Maunsell (now part of Aecom) and was seconded into Manchester City Council on traffic engineering and road safety projects. This sparked her interest and the beginnings of her specialist knowledge in road safety auditing.

In 2011 Jodie took up an opportunity in Qatar on a short-term contract. She is still working and living in the ME, now in Dubai, having made it home for her family.

**Brindha** graduated as a civil engineer and then undertook a masters in transport planning both in India. In 2002 she entered the engineering industry in India. At this time there were lots of opportunities in IT, but she opted for a career in transport and civil engineering and has since worked in India, Singapore and UAE.

Brindha is passionate about evidence-based decision making and through her work with Singapore MRT she built a simulation model for the public transport system to assist with scenario planning and operations. After Singapore Brindha moved to Dubai and settled with her family. She is also part of the EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) set of initiatives at Arup and she believes strongly in training and continuous learning. She has pushed herself to take part in opportunities such as the postgraduate modules on data and programming included in Arup University, with residential visits to London and San Francisco. She has balanced her job, family commitments and the learning and development and Arup supported her in this.

Brindha spoke very positively about other initiatives at Arup and in the industry such as reverse mentoring where a senior male leader is paired with a junior female to talk through challenges and to help broaden understanding about what help women need to develop a successful career in industry.

**Nebras** was always encouraged and praised at school, and this gave her confidence to explore and develop her interest in science and engineering. Her father was a civil engineer with a small construction company, and she was always excited by the plans and drawings and was encouraged to visit sites complete with hard hat and high visibility vest! She wanted to become a civil engineer. However, Nebras soon realised that rather than the technical engineering route into the industry, she was more interested in developing a career in project management. She took the bold decision to move to Dubai. Saying goodbye to family and friends was difficult but she pushed herself to step outside her comfort zone and this has helped her grow in confidence.

Nebras' advice to women starting off their careers is to challenge yourselves and overcome your fears! Nebras quoted Nelson Mandela when he said *"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."*

**Yara** was encouraged by her teachers (her mother is a maths teacher) to consider a career in engineering. She always had a great feeling when she overcame a difficult problem and naturally gravitated towards STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects. However, she wasn't sure how to translate her interests into a career, but with a father who was an accountant in the civil engineering industry, she was drawn to this. She wanted to find a job where she could always be advancing and developing herself, and where the work would impact positively on people's lives. Transport planning met these two criteria and she applied to Aecom and got a position as a Graduate Transport planner.

At university Yara was the only girl in the class but she had very positive experiences and took part in an outreach programme at the American University which connected with girls at high school who were interested in STEM.

## Questions

### How did experiences differ when working in different countries?

**Brindhya** noted that in Singapore there was a good balance between work and life, although the work ethic is very strong. In the UAE challenging deadlines can be stressful. However, the UAE government is opening up more opportunities for women and changes to the law for parents is making life more flexible.

**Jodie** felt that the UAE is making strong steps to support women. In the UK the support networks are very well established and there is not such a need for a step change.

**Nebras** said that working part time, or flexibly, is not very common in the UAE and people are not yet used to the idea of women in the workplace. This will change over time.

### Which country has the best developed road safety laws?

**Jodie** felt the UK is amongst the best and the UAE is catching up.

### How important are role models in encouraging women to come into transport?

**Brindhya** thought that role models are very important and that sharing experiences is also critical. Her mother has always been a role model for her. She also feels she has the support of her team to work flexibly. Her advice would be to keep sharing positive experiences and challenges and get involved in interesting projects!

**Yara** said that role models are especially important and that they don't have to be very senior, perhaps somebody one stage further ahead in the career path to help with the understanding of how you can progress.

**Jodie** said that the principal engineer at Babtie who first interviewed her was a woman. She found it comforting that a woman could work at a senior level and make decisions for the company. In the UAE Jodie has found herself the most senior female in most work situations and there are pressures from dealing with men all the time. There are very few female role models at the senior level in the UAE.



**Nebras** thought that there were female role models everywhere, just not at a very senior level, but she did think that role models are important to keep morale up during challenging times. Zaha Hadid is a great role model.

**Michelle** entered the debate by saying that there were few role models for her at a senior level, but she agreed that Zaha Hadid was inspirational. When Michelle started her career there were very few women in the industry, but the male role models were generally ok! She wanted to get into transport planning because it took her to new and exciting places, meeting some great people on fantastic projects.


## Survey Analysis and Conclusion

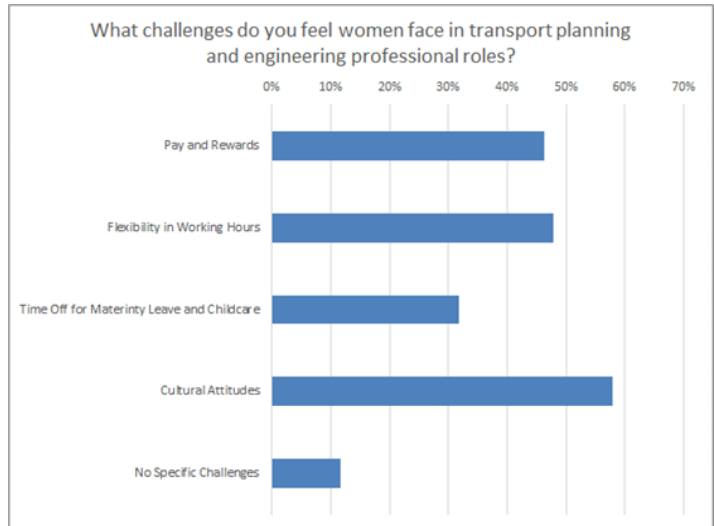
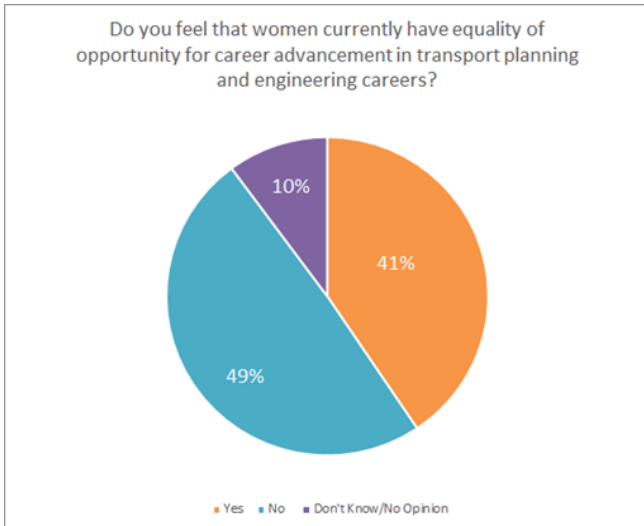
Jonathan and Michelle presented the four survey questions asked to people registering for this event around equality of opportunity, current challenges, the impact of COVID-19 and potential solutions. The analysis is presented below, and the discussion continued around the answers.

This Seminar is part of a programme of activities being coordinated by CIHT across its entire constituency to celebrate INWED21. Further details are available on the Women in Transport section of the CIHT Website – See <https://www.ciht.org.uk/professional-development/get-involved/women-in-transport/>.



**We're raising the profile  
of women engineers for  
#INWED21!**

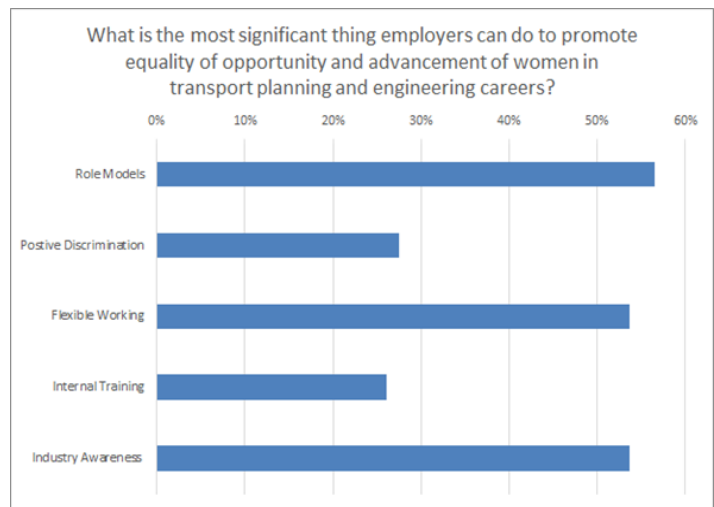
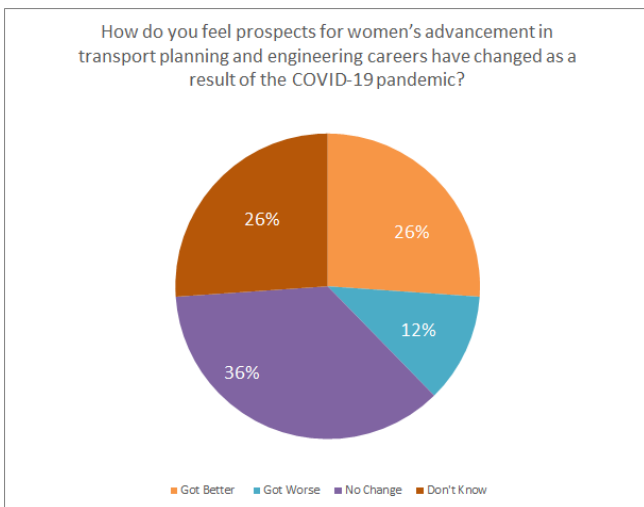
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**Jodie** thought that there was equality of opportunity but that the transport industry was male dominated. The pressure is on as a female to be outstanding with most decisions being made by men. It would be good to have more female voices in decision making.

**Nebras** didn't believe that women have less opportunities to men but agreed that work was needed to get more women making decisions in the industry. Flexibility of packages would also be a great help for women.

**Brindhya** thought that there were great opportunities in larger companies but that these might be limited in smaller firms. The biggest challenge as a women is being accepted in a role and men often see younger women, and their need to take time out to have and care for families, as disruptive.



**Jodie** said that although prospects for women in the industry have not got worse, the pressures on time have made the work/life balance worse. Juggling work, childcare and home schooling during the pandemic has been very challenging. Jodie regularly works late into the night when the children are in bed and works at weekends as well.

**Brindhya** thought that the pandemic had made prospects for women in the industry better. The workplace has become more accepting of flexible hours and virtual working which has made balancing home and work commitments easier. The Arup Work Unbound policy allows members to balance their own needs against those of the team and clients with the ability to work when you wish, where you wish, as long as you are present in the office or client workplace two days a week.

**Nebras and Yara** both agreed that virtual working has made working life more flexible but also more intense.