

Breaking Through the Concrete Ceiling: Tradeswomen in the United States Tell Their Stories of Struggle and Success

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Abstract

Today, women comprise about half of the United States workforce. Yet, they are still the majority of workers in the lowest paid jobs. In the construction industry, on-the-job training and unions have helped generations of white tradesmen acquire wages and benefits supportive of themselves and their families. This paper explores women's desires to gain careers in the building trades, where they currently represent approximately 3% of workers. Data gained from interviews with tradeswomen and others in the construction industry indicate that gender parity remains elusive. As opposed to classical economic theory and construction industry conventional wisdom positing that women do not want to work construction, or are not able, this essay explores barriers in place keeping tradeswomen from successful careers.

Keywords:

Tradeswomen, occupational segregation by gender, construction industry workforce

Introduction

The majority of United States households rely on women's wages to pay their bills (Lyles 2013). Yet women earn less than men for doing the same jobs, and they lose even more in wages due to gendered occupational segregation (Mastracci 2004). The jobs women most often hold—bookkeeper, office manager, teacher, and retail salesperson—pay less and offer fewer opportunities for upward movement than those dominated by men (Mastracci 2004). In fact, more than 80% of women are gainfully employed in only 71 of 400 occupations identified by the Bureau of Labor (Moccio 2009). A 2016 report titled 'Pathways to equity: Narrowing the wage gap by improving women's access to good middle-skill jobs' states, 'Even with some college or an associate degree, women's median weekly earnings for full-time work leave a household of one adult with two children in near-poverty.' (Hegewisch, Bendick, Gault & Hartmann 2016, p. 5). By contrast, work in numerous blue-collar occupations has allowed (mostly) men with high school diplomas, or even less education, to earn middle-class incomes. In building construction trades, on-the-job training and unions have helped generations of white men acquire wages and benefits fully supportive of themselves and their families. This paper explores women's desires to gain careers in those trades.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal to discriminate against women when hiring, but there was more than a 10-year lag from the signing of that act until women—even in small numbers—were admitted to building-construction unions and construction trade occupations. In 1976, a consortium of women's groups sued the U.S. Department of Labor for

failing to enforce equal access to jobs in the construction industry. President Carter responded by issuing affirmative action regulations establishing a goal for hiring women on construction projects that use more than \$10,000 in federal funds (Eisenberg 1998). The Carter administration set a goal of increasing the number of women to 6.9% of the workforce by the 1980s, with the aim for women to be 24% of the building trades workforce by 2000 (Eisenberg 1998). Thanks to this hiring goal and other programs supporting gender equality, women entered the trades in noticeable numbers in the late 70s, but, since then there has been no steady increase in the number of tradeswomen as an overall portion of the construction workforce (Moir, Thomson & Kelleher 2011).

Framing the research

Though women currently comprise just under half the workforce in the U.S., they are approximately 3% of building trade workers (United States Department of Labor (USDOL) 2012). Why this disparity? Classical economic theorists posit that women do not work in significant numbers in male-dominated jobs with higher earnings (including blue-collar occupations) because they prefer not to or are actually unable to do the work (Mastracci 2004). Kris Paap, a former carpenter's apprentice, illuminates how 'taste and preferences' theory guides discussion when the construction industry considers diversifying the workforce:

In almost all meetings and publications dedicated to the increase of diversity in construction, one can observe that those who represent the industry as either employers or union representatives raise similar if not identical questions about the process through which this increase in diversity should take place. Specifically, they argue that nontraditional workers need to be *found* and *recruited* [emphasis in original]. . . . As sincere as these comments may be, even a perfunctory review of the industry's history suggests that these questions are more the *product* [emphasis in original] of the true problem than a path to effective solutions (Paap 2006, pp. 103-04).

The segregation of 'groups' (identity categories of gender, nationality, race, etc.) within capitalist labor markets is not well explained by orthodox economic theory (Reich, Gordon & Edwards 1973). In *Breaking out of the Pink-Collar Ghetto* (2004), Sharon Mastracci argues that there are other reasons besides desire or a skills gap why women are the majority of workers in the lowest-paid jobs:

Labor markets themselves are social structures that cannot be analyzed separately from their contexts, and, therefore, are far more than the sum of individuals' investments in their human capital. Individual workers exercise only so much agency in determining their labor market outcomes; decisions of employers and workers have a lot more to do with the prevailing structures of labor market institutions and the habits and customs therein (p. 14).

Similar to Mastracci's statement regarding limits to an individual's control over her or his labor market outcomes, my argument is that there are individual, institutional, societal, and cultural processes which work to exclude women from building trade occupations. Rather than change the behavior of the mythical 'few bad apples,' systemic change at the social and organizational level is still necessary. One way to do this is to reduce the effects of stereotypes in the workplace and in larger cultural narratives feeding into supposed 'occupational choice.' As opposed to the idea of a woman's distaste for construction, many women who have attempted

to acquire work in the building trades, as well as men of color, find perplexing union representatives' and employers' lamentations over not being able to find people other than white men who want to work (See Eisenberg 1998; Martin 1988; Moir, et al. 2011). Behind the lamentations are, I would argue, five common sentiments or a gendered ideology that persists regarding women's (lack of) participation in the building trades. These sentiments include the following:

1.) **There is something inherent about being a woman that causes women to not want to work construction.** The consequences of this belief intimate that a tradeswoman acts against her 'inherent' female desire, she is acting selfishly, taking a job from a man, just there to find a man (not a career), or she is not a real woman (often creating a context in which the label of 'lesbian' is intended as a slight).

2.) **Women cannot work construction because they will quit when they have children, or they are primary caretakers of children, and hence cannot fulfill the job travel and hour requirements.** Thus, a tradeswoman acts against the female responsibility of motherhood.

3.) **Women insist on 'looking good.'** This includes being clean, smelling like flowers (fragrance), wearing dress clothes such as high-heeled shoes, and having one's hair and nails done in ways appropriate for normative feminine expression. As some of these self-grooming techniques do not fit well with the construction workday, women won't work construction because they don't want to give up their 'feminine' appearance. Thus, a tradeswoman acts against femininity (i.e., she is ugly).

4) **Women are weak and small and cannot handle the physical and technical aspects of the job as well as men.** A tradeswoman acts against prescribed ability and the notion that women are the 'weaker sex.'

5.) **Women's personalities are such that they do not want to and/or cannot handle the established construction worksite culture.** Thus, a tradeswoman wantonly enters a space where she is not supposed to be, that she cannot handle—hence, she is just a potential lawsuit.

The above pervasive narratives are translated in a myriad of ways by society in general, including by those who are gatekeepers of construction careers. The notions are used to undermine not just a woman expressing a desire to work in the trades, but the very idea of a tradeswoman. Hence, men and women on construction sites must (re)negotiate what they have been taught about a rigidly defined gender binary intertwining with job definitions.

For example, something that should be consistent and professional, such as conducting interviews with job applicants, has unsettled industry gatekeepers when women are the interviewees. Women have described their interviews for union apprenticeships or with contractor-superintendents as 'non' or 'anti' interviews. In Martin's *Hard-Hatted Women* (1998), a sheet metal worker related the experience of finding out she had been accepted into an apprenticeship program while, in the same conversation, being told that women should not work in the trade. Nina Saltman, a carpenter, also described the following job interview experience:

When I got [to the jobsite] the next day, I got a speech that was becoming all too familiar. [Quoting the superintendent,] 'Well, uh, er, we have had other girls work here before. (PUFF, PUFF on the cigar.) And, uh, er, they just haven't been able to handle the work.' TRANSLATION: We don't really want you broads here, but we're being forced to hire you. The other women couldn't take the abuse... will you? (Martin, 125)

Saltman described this as the ‘Everywoman’ speech—a speech suggesting a company had hired a woman in the past and it hadn’t worked out, so it was questionable as to whether they should hire a woman again (Martin 1998). Hence, while the industry likes to present the idea of a neutral (read: equal) playing field, women have pointed to consistent discouragement from those in the industry concerning women even gaining entry-level positions in the field.

Methods

Women work in construction because of liveable wages, opportunity for advancement, the physicality of job tasks, and the tangible results of a day’s labor, but they remain a severe minority of the workforce (Latour 2008; Martin 1998; Schroedel 1985). They continue to struggle with job acquisition, avoiding layoffs, gaining opportunities for training and promotions, and finding work environments free of gender and sexual harassment. Therefore, in exploring contemporary experiences of women in the building trades, my research was not concerned with finding women who might like to work construction, nor the type of personality a woman might have that could lead her to want to work in the building trades. Instead, I explore societal barriers, including ideologies and attitudes that keep women from equal access to trade careers.

My larger research project examined the policy tool of setting hiring goals for tradeswomen on construction projects, with a focus on publicly funded construction sites in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, and Portland, Oregon. Here, I present analysis of interviews conducted in 2014-2015, along with observations and conversations with those in the construction industry, and documents including review of items such as websites, meeting minutes, and email exchanges referencing women in construction. Participants included tradeswomen, advocates (those whose jobs involve working for policy that supports tradeswomen, people of color, unions, and/or contractors), union employees, construction company employees, and government workers (see Table 1).

Table 1.

List of participants

ID	Gender	Race	Organization	TradespersonY/N
1	Female	White	Union	Tradeswoman
2	Female	AfricanAm	Union	Tradeswoman
3	Female	White	advocacy for industry	No
4	Male	AfricanAm	Government	No
5	Female	White	Union	Tradeswoman
6	Female	White	Union	Tradeswoman
7	Female	White	advocacy for industry	No
8	Female	AfricanAm	Government	No
9	Female	White	construction company	No
10	Female	NativeAm	Union	Tradeswoman
11	Male	AfricanAm	advocacy for trades workers	Tradesman

			advocacy for trades	
12	Male	AfricanAm	workers	No
13	Female	White	construction company	Tradeswoman
14	Female	White	construction company	No
15	Male	AfricanAm	advocacy for industry	Tradesman
			advocacy for trades	
16	Female	AfricanAm	workers	No
			advocacy for trades	
17	Male	AfricanAm	workers	No
			advocacy for trades	
18	Female	White	workers	Tradeswoman
19	Male	White	Union	Tradesman

Data collection

Purposeful, snowball sampling was implemented. Once participants were identified, interviews took place at a location suggested by the interviewee. Place of work and coffee shops were the most common meeting locations. During all interviews, notes were recorded on the researcher's laptop. Audio recordings were made for the slight majority of interviews and recordings were transcribed. One interview was conducted while the interviewee was 'on the go' and was only able to meet for a short time. Two individuals specifically requested not to be recorded and two, by decision of the researcher, were not recorded to add a layer of anonymity. Though the interviews were open-ended, individually-tailored guiding questions were used, such as: Why did you choose to work construction? What do you like about the work? What do you dislike about the work? Describe the process you went through to acquire work in this field. Who are your co-workers? What is being done to support women in construction?

Data analysis

Transcribed interviews, or interview notes, were initially coded by inductively created topics. Emerging categories included the following: advocacy, economy, harassment, hiring, hiring goals, pre-apprentice, race, tradeswomen, training, union, what-do-at-work, why-lack-diversity-why-need-diversity, and work-history-how-landed-job. Next, participant statements concerning women in the construction workforce were put into either the 'barrier' category or the 'intervention' category—how the participants discussed perceived barriers (i.e., anything that restrains or obstructs progress or access), and how they described positive interventions. Finally, the coded interview and document data (email exchanges, websites) was used to present a narrative regarding the lack of tradeswomen on construction sites (the barriers) and what needs to change to ameliorate that lack (interventions).

Findings

Going against the grain

Tradeswoman-participants found their way to construction work through a few different paths. Two individuals had fathers in the construction industry, both of whom worked alongside their respective dads when young. One shared, 'My dad was a contractor, and I grew up helping him. During college I worked in the field.' Another participant, whose father was an electrician, stated, 'I used to go to work with my dad as a kid. It wasn't any jobsite that would hurt me. I'd

put on receptacle covers, just stuff that kept me occupied and happy. I thought it was fun at eight years old.’ Other women said they found the work ‘by accident.’ One participant described acquiring basic skills from a trade school:

Accidentally. I signed up for culinary school . . . and got sent to the wrong place [building trades program]. . . . That was in 1977. I was getting a low-interest loan for school, and they said that they would only give that to me if I would go into nursing or foods or—what was the third one? Secretarial. So anyway, I just pushed it and got [into the building trades program].

Initially, this participant worked non-union construction jobs, but she joined a union when a friend of her father revealed the union wage: ‘I talked to [a union construction worker], and he told me how much money they made, and it was huge compared to what I was making, and I said, “Sign me up,” is what I said, literally, on the phone.’ Another woman, who now owns a construction company, said a friend in the field encouraged her to apply: ‘I just took a summer job as a union apprentice. A friend of mine who was doing it said, “It’s great money. You’re a strong woman from the farm. You can do it.” . . . So I signed up, and it was a job where they had to hire—it was a county job.’ Having a college degree and originally thinking of the work as a ‘summer pay check,’ the participant stayed in the industry. She found that she ‘loved it,’ in particular the combination of physical and mental challenges.

A different woman told of first meeting a tradeswoman when their children were at the same day-care:

There was a young lady—well, we had our children at the same day-care facility, and I know that she was always dressed in construction clothes, and I would ask her how did she get into it? And I really admired her. . . . In the morning, she’d be all clean. Then, when she’d come back to get [her children], there’d be dust and everything all over her. And I was just like, ‘Wow! I would love to do that.’

It took a move and a divorce before this participant found her way into construction work. One participant recounted how she didn’t begin working construction until her 40s. She lauded the life-altering effects of union wages and benefits, how she will have a retirement pension, how her health improved, and the positive impact of all the above on her family: ‘I saw the fruits of my labor. I saw how I could transform space. I could do that with a smile on my face. I was releasing a lot of endorphins. I knew it was the right job for me.’

Baseline requirements exist for any man or woman entering the construction field—physical strength and ability; a driver’s license, and usually, access to an automobile; often a willingness to work overtime, and sometimes, an ability to travel. One barrier to meeting baseline requirements that was discussed by a number of participants was the assumption that women are primary caretakers of children. The need to take care of one’s children has been a reason women leave the field, and childcare challenges can increase when overtime is required; but this issue is faced by any parents working jobs requiring overtime or hours outside of the nine-to-five workday.

In many cases, complete childcare responsibilities do not necessarily fall on the woman who works in the building trades. One tradeswoman had a husband who was a stay-at-home dad.

Another woman remained conscious of her commute. If she were sent to a jobsite too far away, she would quit or request a different worksite. Using this tactic, she was able to remain consistently employed, since a union hall usually has multiple sites where members are working. In this case, the union and employers worked with the participant to keep her employed. Wanting to spend more time with family, the same individual turned down a supervisory job because it required taking work home at night. She noted it was years before she heard one of her male co-workers mention childcare: ‘I have to say the first time I heard a guy say, “No, I can't stay late, because I've got to pick the kids up at day-care,” I literally stopped in my tracks because it just was like the world had changed.’

A union employee echoed the sentiment about an unfriendly work environment for parents: ‘Construction is not historically that patient with those kinds of things. [That] whole work-life balance thing doesn't seem to have travelled to construction yet. I think it's going to have to; I mean, an incoming generation of people is going to insist on it, men and women alike.’ The construction industry likely needs to find better methods to support men and women who have young children. However, the workforce participation rate for women having at least one child three years old or younger is approximately 61% in the U.S. (Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2014). Hence, continuing to assume that all women have young children needing childcare, and that this is the reason women cannot work construction, is a false narrative. Women with young children most likely need to be in the workforce to support their family. Therefore, rather than using motherhood as a reason women cannot be successful in the workforce, a more beneficial approach for all who are primary caretakers of others would be public and workplace policies supporting family leave and childcare.

Tradeswomen and advocate participants discussed the need for self-confidence and self-efficacy when navigating the hiring process and job tasks. They described needing skills such as being a ‘hard worker, arriving on time, working well with others, taking direction, giving direction, going above what is asked.’ Women explained that they initially often observed peers, gauging at what level they needed to be working, e.g., considering how many boards they should carry or how fast tasks needed to be executed. In some instances, they felt they needed to be doing a little more than their male co-workers. One participant described her approach:

If I saw guys were doing it, I would just—I was a very—I can't think of what I'm trying to think of, but cognizant of how guys were working and would watch them to make sure that I did at least what they were doing, if not better. And so, if they were carrying 2x10s and beams and headers by themselves, then I was gonna do it by myself and even more so.

These tradeswomen self-identified their physical strength, knowledge, and work ethic as reasons they are successful. One woman stated, ‘I haven't been laid off that often. That sounds like bragging.’ Tradeswomen need this confidence to negotiate male-dominated environments because the empirical and anecdotal evidence finds tradeswomen do experience more layoffs than their male co-workers (Abaffy 2010).

Gender Preferences in Construction

Of course, by law, gender discrimination in the workplace is not allowed. Yet women struggle to even get hired in the trades, so the few women who are on construction sites often find themselves the only woman or, at best, one of a handful. A tradeswoman said, ‘At [one project],

there were hundreds of workers, so maybe one to two other women were there. Some jobs, I don't see any other women.' Further, because the presence of a woman can threaten the ideal of construction trades work as inherently masculine (also see Denissen & Saguy 2014), women in this study negotiated the issue of their gender while working in the building trades. One tradeswoman stated, 'You have to fit in, but you don't want to be manly or aggressive. You want to keep your own identity.' Another woman described balancing 'not trying to be one of them' but needing to be 'close enough' for some level of acceptance: 'It took a bit—like I said, the time test. I would ride it out. As soon as they [men] got used to me, and that I wasn't trying to be one of them, and I was close enough that—and I could hold my own. I was a big, strong girl so they would accept me to a certain degree.' Arising in subtle and overt ways is an underlying question: 'How can one be a woman and an electrician, iron worker, plumber, or mason?' Hence, 'fitting in' on a crew usually requires an extra level of 'proof' that a tradeswoman could do her job. One participant stated, 'You have to show them [men] that you—whereas a man, they just assume that you can— can do the job. And a woman, it's assumed that she's there, you know, filling some quota. That's definitely a big difference.' Another tradeswoman acknowledged the extra layer of 'having to prove' herself but then said that, once co-workers saw she was a good worker, she was accepted: 'My experiences were not the same to begin with. That's because most of them [men] think "here's a girl."' Tradeswomen have to be good at their jobs because one woman's failure (or even just fatigue or making a mistake) is often not seen as an individual failure, but as a failure of all women's capabilities as construction workers. One participant who works on the office side of construction described a situation where a woman hire had not worked out for a company:

I had a hiring manager. I gave him a resume, and he said, 'Oh, that's a woman. I've already done that. I'm not hiring a woman again,' and his objections to that particular woman he had hired was that she was—she couldn't carry a ladder, she was short . . . the crew didn't take to her.

A tradeswoman described how she would not show any weakness or signs of injury. 'I never would take a hand, and I'd do it all by myself. I'd just go home really stiff. And if I cut myself or if I did anything, I was not gonna tell anybody. If I was stiff, if I was sore, if I was bruised, I was always fine.' This hiding of injury to seem tough is one safety issue that crosses genders as men in construction also need to appear 'tough.' Depending on one's trade, union membership status, and employer, there often are some accommodations for sick leave or worker's compensation. But if a man is injured on a construction site, it's not assumed that all men can't work construction because they'll just get injured.

Similarly to how men working construction might be considered 'hardy,' the women interviewed also hold themselves and other women to a 'toughness' standard. One tradeswoman said, 'I'm just thinking; there are literally some women who are so thin-skinned. What are they doing there? And there's other women that will just do whatever they're told and they'll just keep, you know, they'll never advance because they don't speak up for themselves.' Having to 'pull one's own weight' as a tradeswoman was valued by these participants not only in their own work, but also in evaluating other women at job sites. With few women in the field, any woman who enters the building trades and then quits, is laid-off, or is 'let go' feeds the cultural narrative that women cannot or do not want to do this work.

Addressing a Monoculture

A couple of participants I interviewed mentioned not sitting with the rest of their crew at breaks, and not having much to talk about with male co-workers. Women discussed struggles they had such as an often less-than-cordial work environment; one individual noted that construction sites are often ‘sink or swim.’ Another shared the experience of her first day at work:

I was pretty much a joke for a lot of people when I arrived to the jobsite. But they didn't know my strength. They saw my appearance, and they assumed my ability. I'm a woman and I'm old and I'm heavy. . . . I was told what to bring [by a training program] which was a source of laughter. They told me to bring a shovel, but not what type. I'd never been on a construction site. I loaded a concrete hopper for the first months. Cleaning and tearing down scaffolding—but they didn't know what I could do, so I was just in charge of clean-up, and then, almost everyone was young enough to be my son. I didn't take my breaks with them so I have no idea. . . . I was grateful to be there. It was a great exercise to be there. I had to dig deep. I've worked harder for a lot less money. I was 15 years as a battered woman; it's not hard to dig deep. I felt so vital.

Another interviewee remembered her early years working construction and how, even if she was invited to socialize, she remained aloof:

I was invited out for beers. I didn't go. You don't fraternize. You just keep your distance, and then it seemed to keep a nice respect. But then you don't have any friends either. . . . I would come home pretty quiet and, not only stiff, but didn't have anybody to talk to all day long or not much in common. So that could be a little bit of a drag.

The above circumstances require women to abide the daily experience of being the outsider in a monocultural work environment. The isolation a woman can feel, combined with all-male co-workers, and the work being tied to masculinity can make for difficult situations negotiating how to execute one's job tasks versus not threatening anyone's masculinity. One participant reported the following experiences:

I think there's a lot of guys that don't want to be outdone by a woman, outworked, and so sometimes there—this sounds so cliché, and I don't mean to be sexist, but sometimes there's an ego there that, if you bruise it, it just turns into like a competition or confrontation of some—I don't know. I have had some awesome partners [co-workers]. . . . But if you ever have a bad partner, you don't forget it. It's a constant struggle every day because you're not in the center of things like he is.

Among this monoculture, women often feel that co-workers or supervisors are hostile to even their presence at the jobsite. Another participant confided, ‘I have spent many sleepless nights thinking, “Am I going to be able to hold onto my job?” because there's a lot of people who don't want me there, and you start to wonder, why am I holding on to this? But sometimes, you just don't want them to win.’

Women who do not have family members in the industry, who are older, are not originally from the United States, who are lesbian, are a person of color, and/or are ‘feminine’ likely will

have more barriers with which to contend when working (or even attempting to work) in the building trades. A European-American tradeswoman expressed her frustration with the culture of maltreatment of ‘difference’ on jobsites:

I see how African Americans are treated, how lesbians are treated, and it is criminal the way Latinos are treated. If people are brought into the trades, it’s who you know, the connections you have, your social circles . . . instead of that you’d be judged on your work, on your output, but you don’t see that out in the trades. You see people set up to fail.

Intolerance of mistakes or being ‘set-up to fail’ for people who are not white men was mentioned by more than one participant. For instance, going from being an apprentice to a journey worker in the trades is a significant step, an acknowledgement that an individual has put in training hours and is a skilled person in his or her craft. This promotion has, too often, been elusive for people who are not white men (Moir, Thomson & Kelleher 2011). One African-American tradeswoman illuminated the challenge of getting this promotion, specifically for people of color:

I think the biggest thing why they’re not letting them in is because it’s the white male syndrome, where they think that they’re above and we’re below, and that they just don’t want us in those—they just don’t want us working next to them. They don’t want us making that same amount of money that they make.

A discomfort with ‘difference’ was discussed by the majority of participants. Advocates broached industry insularity, acknowledging that it’s not necessarily malevolent; it’s partially out of habit and fairly universal behavior. One discussion went as follows:

People tend to enter the construction trades, particularly on the union side, if they know somebody who’s in them. . . Part of that is that union apprenticeships, unfortunately, they don’t get a whole lot of attention. So you almost have to know somebody to learn about them, but the other part of it is that it’s just you tend to refer the people around you for work.

To a certain extent, the industry has functioned like any other in its hiring and promotion processes, but it has guarded its monoculture more rigorously, resulting in a situation where tradeswomen must assert both their desire to do their job and their need for equal access.

The bias can be subtle. A participant employed in the office side of construction stated, ‘It’s things you wouldn’t think of, and it’s not always intentional. I just went on a tour of a site, and I brought my hardhat but forgot glasses. So they gave me a pair that was huge and falling down my face.’ The bias can seem understandable, simply confusion at finding a woman at work in the construction field. Another woman participant who works on the office side of the industry conjectured, ‘I think that’s a battle, that even the nicest people are perplexed when they’re confronted with something that’s not the norm.’ However, all of the covert and overt bias against women accumulates in workdays that, for tradeswomen, can be a constant struggle. Anyone who is different is expected to conform to or at least tolerate the crassness of this culture. For example, one individual who attempted entry into a trades training program for women was not admitted, being told she did not seem ‘thick-skinned’ enough. Meaning, the thick skin was not needed for construction work, but, rather, to negotiate worksite culture.

Discussion

I found tradeswomen who sincerely enjoyed their work. They value the combined use of physical and mental skills required for job tasks, and love being able to see the immediate results of their labor while working outdoors. They want to see more women in the field, and hold themselves and other women to high standards. Materializing, to some degree in the data, was the classical economic narrative declaring why people work the jobs they do. As in previous studies and anecdotal narratives, some participants did allude to the idea of women simply not wanting to work construction. Countering that narrative is, of course, empirical evidence of women's desire and efforts to create successful careers in the building trades. An employee at a tradeswomen advocacy organization that runs pre-apprenticeship training programs answered the common refrain that women aren't interested in or capable of building trades work: 'When people say women aren't interested, I'd point to the numbers of women that come in our door every year saying they are interested.' The non-profit has about one hundred women per year going into its pre-apprenticeship and other programs.

A few women interviewed had moved from building trades into other jobs within or linked to the construction industry—for example, working for a trade union or a non-profit tradeswomen advocacy organization. These types of career moves could be viewed as positive, and are career moves in line with the path some men take. When examining the experiences of tradeswomen, some findings from previous research resonated with participants—feelings of isolation, not fitting in, and having to repeatedly prove oneself. Since working construction is not initially presented to women when they are young, many find their way into the trades after earning college degrees or in mid-life when they need and are searching for a way to support themselves and family. In that fact alone, they are often different from their male peers.

The covert and overt bias against women impacts their workdays in the construction field. Others have researched the psychological effects of negotiating construction's male-dominated environment,¹ and here, too, isolation, stress regarding keeping one's job, or dealing with hostile co-worker(s) did negatively affect women participants. Hence, women are regularly left in the following double binds:

- 1.) Trying to fit into not just a male-dominated, but a masculine-dominated work culture, yet not being allowed to act too manly or aggressive.
- 2.) Having to be more than competent at the work, but not allowed to show up a male co-worker.
- 3.) Being collegial, but needing to keep a distance.

Since they are not 'in the center of things,' this outsider status can leave tradeswomen lacking workplace connections (social capital). Those informal workplace connections and support that people can find at work—friendships, someone who's got your back and will stick up for you when you're not there—can remain elusive. Finally, the lingering requirement (unofficial but ubiquitous) to supply 'proof' that one can be a woman and a construction worker speaks to a continuing rejection of women within the industry.

¹ See, for example, Goldenhar, Swanson, Hurrell, Ruder & Deddens' 'Stressors and adverse outcomes for female construction workers' (1998).

Conclusions

The United States remains a society where occupations are regularly identified with a specific gender (Hegewisch & Hartmann 2014). Persisting with the argument that women simply prefer to be clustered in low-wage jobs with little room for advancement is buncombe. True opportunity needs to be created for women wanting to work in construction and other blue-collar occupations. As the U.S. population becomes a white minority and as women continue to participate in the workforce in high numbers, other occupations, such as within the government at the local, state, and federal levels, have become more diverse (Hegewisch & Hartmann 2014). Those workforce demographic changes are adding a small amount of momentum to a long-standing movement attempting diversity in the building trades.

Affirmative action policy, which assisted in opening the doors to women in the building trades, is one option that can be used to continue supporting women who choose to become plumbers, masons, or electricians. Affirmative action is a controversial topic that takes on an extra layer of anxiety in the construction industry. Rather than acknowledging historical inequities leading to workforce segregation, employers in construction often portray lack of a diverse workforce as the *result* of a disinterest by all women and men of color (Paap 2006). Published in 2006, Greene's conclusion in *Blue-Collar Women at Work with Men* asserts, "The overriding social message is that women do not belong and cannot succeed in traditionally male, blue-collar jobs" (Greene 2006, p. 181). A new message needs to be sent to women that construction work is demanding, and women can meet these demands. As it stands now, a few tradeswomen are left constantly having to explain (prove) themselves and their existence on construction sites. A viable alternative to the low wages and lack of benefits characteristic of the gig and "independent contractor" economy, many trades occupations offer union membership, good training, wages, benefits, and opportunities for promotion. They are the types of jobs that provide for the U.S. working class's achievement of a middle-class life. Now, with baby boomers retiring and women working in a wider range of occupations, the time seems ripe for a significant renewed push in recruiting women into the building trades.

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