Gender, Safety, and the Construction Trades

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Women’s Under-representation

• The goal of 6.9 percent hours by tradeswomen on federally-funded construction projects has been federal law since 1978.

• The mandate that construction contractors “ensure and maintain a working environment free of harassment, intimidation and coercion” has been federal law since 1978.

• However, women continue to represent only 3% of skilled trades workers in the US.

Industry-Contractors, owners, and unions have largely not complied with the law.

Government enforcement agencies have fallen far short of their obligation to implement equality for women in the construction trades.
The Trades: A Masculine Workplace

• The trades are “masculine” because the majority group of men have set rules and norms surrounding the entry process based on their identities as “men.”
• The culture is defined by its attitude toward women and how women are different from men.
• Camaraderie and community member status is gained through group discussion of women in a sexualized manner.
• Women (and other minorities) have low social standing at work and less power to change the culture.
• Group dynamics in the trades are based on strict gender roles that negatively impact women’s health and safety on the job.

SAFETY AND HEALTH EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN IN TRADES

A study by the University of Washington Department of Environmental & Occupational Health Sciences, Washington Women in Trades, Washington State Labor Education and Research Center

• Study goal: to identify and address the impact of health and safety risks affecting women workers

• Study methods
  • Focus groups
  • Questionnaires
SHEWT Focus Group Themes: 
Health & Safety Hazards for All Workers

- Slips/trips/falls
- Being struck by a falling object or machinery
- Caught in/between a trench, cave-ins, vehicle and object
- Electrocution
- Musculoskeletal disorders from lifting, awkward postures, repetitive motion, hand-tool vibration, flying/falling objects
- Exposure to a variety of chronic health hazards, including noise, silica, asbestos, man-made fibers, lead and other metals, solvents, hazardous wastes, extreme heat and cold

SHEWT Focus Group Themes: 
Women-Specific Hazards Identified

- Inadequate PPE
- Physical limitations
- Sexual harassment
- Gender discrimination and unequal training
- Physical overcompensation due to constantly proving self
- Tokenism
- Poor work/life balance
- Fear of layoff for reporting safety concerns
- Lack of support

Safety and health problems in construction create barriers to women entering and remaining in this field.
Key SHEWT Findings: Women Reported Higher Stress and Injury Compared to Men

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<tr>
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<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Injured at work in past year</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>High perceived stress</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>18%</td>
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Key SHEWT Findings: Overcompensation and Gender Discrimination Are Occupational Safety and Health Issues

- Injury risk more than doubled for women who reported gender discrimination or bullying.
- Tradeswomen who overcompensated were more than four times as likely to report injury at work compared to those who did not.
SOLUTIONS?

- More women!
- Mentoring to promote retention and support under-represented workers
- Training to promote a diverse and inclusive workplace
- Understand implicit biases
- Recognize micro-aggressions and intervene when they occur

Micro-aggressions

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<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>MICRO-AGGRESSION EXAMPLE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Assumption of Criminal Status</td>
<td>A White woman clutches her purse as a Black or Latino person approaches.\n</td>
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Conclusions

- As under-represented workers, women in trades face many stressors that can increase their risk for injury.
- We want to make a safer, more welcoming culture for women.
- It’s important to recognize the implicit biases we pick up from our culture and understand how our assumptions and actions might negatively impact others.

So What Can YOU Do to Help?

Promote a diverse and welcoming workplace

Understand your implicit biases

Recognize micro-aggressions
Resources

- Oregon Tradeswomen: http://www.tradeswomen.net/
- University of Washington SHEWT Study: http://deohs.washington.edu/shewt
- University of Washington Continuing Education Programs: https://osha.washington.edu/
STUDY ON HEALTH AND SAFETY FOR WOMEN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

Summary of Findings
This fact sheet presents findings from the Safety and Health Empowerment for Women in Trades (SHEWT) study, a collaboration between the University of Washington and Washington Women in Trades. The study used focus groups and surveys with women and men working in the trades in Washington State to better understand the health and safety risks affecting tradeswomen at work. Below are the top risks identified by 25 focus group participants and key survey results.

Common Themes Raised in Focus Groups

Health & Injury Risks
- Dangerous work environment
- Inadequate bathrooms
- Chronic injuries

Social/Stress Risks
- Coworker acceptance of risk
- Hazing
- Job insecurity
- Management prioritizing production over safety
- No paid sick leave
- Macho culture

Women-Specific Risks
- Inadequate PPE
- Physical limitations
- Sexual harassment
- Gender discrimination and unequal training
- Overcompensation due to constantly proving self
- Tokenism
- Poor work/life balance
- Fear of layoff for reporting safety concerns
- Lack of support

What Workers Had to Say

“I think that just being a woman you have a lot of pressure to do things that are not the healthiest to keep up with the young 27-year-old guys.”
—Journeywoman laborer

“It’s always hard to break into a group. And there’s a certain amount of...hazing, just pulling tricks on the new person that happens.”
—Journeyman carpenter

“You just gotta be mindful about [electricity]. It doesn’t care what gender you are.”
—Journeywoman electrician

“It’s almost like you have to prove—as a woman—you have to prove yourself 10 fold before somebody will actually give you the respect.”
—Journeywoman laborer

“I think I’ve had guys purposely tell me something that wasn’t true, which could have jeopardized my safety. So I guess, sabotage is sometimes a threat...It falls back into the hostile work environment of the guys who don’t want you there. And therefore they’ll set you up to fail.”
—Journeywoman electrician

“And if you ask for that [handwashing station], which you’re also entitled to, you’re on that layoff next week too.”
—Journeywoman electrician

“I think the trades is a white man’s industry. And so there’s a comfort level with white men to be with white men and to put white men under their wings. And so I think women and people of color and other minorities are at a disadvantage.”
—Retired electrician
Survey Results

- Almost 300 workers completed surveys about health and safety hazards in the workplace
- Demographics: 68% women, 32% men; 43% apprentice, 57% journey level. The top trades represented were: laborers, electricians, pipe trades, and carpenters
- Women reported higher levels of perceived stress compared to men
- More than half of women reported pushing themselves past their physical comfort at least half of the time to get the job done
- Almost half of women felt discriminated against at work due to their gender
- Women were more likely than men to report at least one injury at work in the past year
- Of those respondents who were injured in the past year, women were more likely than men to not report their injury due to fear of layoff
- Women were more likely than men to report PPE not fitting properly. Of women who did not feel comfortable asking for better PPE, more than half listed “fear of being labeled complainer by coworkers” or “fear of layoff” as the primary reason

Compared to men, women in our survey had a higher risk of being injured at work in the past year and a higher risk of reporting high levels of stress.

- Data supports the idea that apprentices experience higher levels of stress than those who have finished their apprenticeship
- For women, overcompensation and gender discrimination were associated with being injured at work in the past year
- For women, reporting high stress was associated with age discrimination, poor work/life balance, and financial hardship
- Women who received high levels of support from their coworkers and supervisor showed a lower risk of stress

Survey Short Answer Themes

Top Problems for Women
- Sexist stereotypes
- Physical limitations
- Discrimination
- Harassment
- Under-representation
- Having to prove selves
- No respect
- Poor work/life balance
- Poor training
- Inadequate PPE/tools
- Women who set bad example

Solutions
- More women
- Education
- Improved training
- Treat women and men equal
- Don’t know
- Mentoring
- Women carry selves

Other Experiences
- Variability in jobsites
- Women feel accepted
- Job insecurity
- Inadequate supervision
- Love work

“I have been doing this a long time. It has gotten better but so much of the stress is covert, hard to pin down. The harassment never really stops; you learn to ignore it. They will take the first opportunity available to replace you. Men don’t want us there so it is a constant, unstated hostile environment.”

—Journeywoman electrician

“Point blank, we are not as strong as men. I have to work twice as hard as a man to do the same job. It is not their fault, and I don’t let it hold me back.”

—Journeywoman laborer

I believe the biggest problem we face is still just proving that we can perform the work as well as other men. I feel I should just be able to walk onto a jobsite and have the confidence of my male coworkers and supervisors, but I have not had that experience in this job.”

—Journeywoman laborer

“We need to continue to educate both sexes in communication and not single out women as the weaker link... Everyone needs to be taught it’s ok to say ‘no this doesn’t feel right or safe.’

—Journeywoman electrician

“It would be ideal to have a mentoring program for women as an apprentice in the particular trade she is in to help understand the construction industry.”

—Journeywoman ironworker
HOW MUCH PROGRESS HAVE WE MADE?
Twenty-first Century Racism and Sexism

There is still plenty of explicit and overt racism and sexism in our world today. Significant progress has been made in some places and among some people to challenge and change these things. What is ongoing, however, are subtle interpersonal actions and reactions that perpetuate racism and sexism. Below are two terms that help us understand these more subtle behaviors.

Implicit Bias
- The automatic association of stereotypes or attitudes with particular groups of people. Most destructive when they are negative, but can also be positive.
- Can happen on an unconscious level.
- Everyone has them, even people committed to impartiality.
- Our implicit biases can contradict our explicit value systems.
- Our implicit biases tend to favor our own group, although it’s possible to be biased against our own group as well.
- Implicit biases can be unlearned.

Micro-aggressions
- Sometimes subtle verbal or non-verbal behaviors that stereotype or demean someone on the basis of their “difference” from dominant culture.
- Can include trivializing or dismissing someone’s experience of discriminatory behavior, or casual degradation of someone different than yourself.
- Whether or not a micro-aggression has occurred is measured by the IMPACT on the person on the receiving end, not the INTENT of the person delivering.
- Can even be the product of genuine interest.

Another major way in which racism and sexism continue is through institutional practices that are so deeply embedded as to have become ‘normal.’ Challenging these can cause a lot of upset. For example, Title IX of the Civil Rights Act requires that girls get the same access as boys to playing sports in publicly funded educational institutions. This was very controversial when it was first made into law, but today, women’s basketball teams or soccer teams have become normal. (The ongoing problem is that professional women athletes are still paid significantly less than their male counterparts.) This is an example of how racist or sexist practices that may be implemented by individuals are actually built into how organizations work. Implicit Bias contributes to this, but solutions have to operate on a structural level, not just vis-à-vis the behavior of individuals.
### Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (from *Diversity in the Classroom, UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development, 2014*). The first step in addressing microaggressions is to recognize when a microaggression has occurred and what message it may be sending. The context of the relationship and situation is critical. Below are common themes to which microaggressions attach.

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| Alien in One’s Own Land  
When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born | • "Where are you from or where were you born?"  
• "You speak English very well."
• "What are you? You’re so interesting looking!"  
• A person asking an Asian American or Latino American to teach them words in their native language.  
• Continuing to mispronounce the names of students after students have corrected the person time and time again. Not willing to listen closely and learn the pronunciation of a non-English based name. | You are not a true American.  
You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.  
Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic. |
| Ascription of Intelligence  
Assigning intelligence to a person of color or a woman based on his/her race/gender | • "You are a credit to your race."
• "Wow! How did you become so good in math?"
• To an Asian person, "You must be good in math, can you help me with this problem?"
• To a woman of color: "I would have never guessed that you were a scientist." | People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites.  
All Asians are intelligent and good in math/science.  
It is unusual for a woman to have strong mathematical skills. |
| Color Blindness  
Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to or need to acknowledge race. | • "When I look at you, I don’t see color."
• "There is only one race, the human race."
• "America is a melting pot."
• "I don’t believe in race."
• Denying the experiences of students by questioning the credibility/validity of their stories. | Assimilate to the dominant culture.  
Denying the significance of a person of color’s racial/ethnic experience and history.  
Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being. |
| Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status  
A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on his/her race. | • A White man or woman clutches his/her purse or checks wallet as a Black or Latino person approaches.  
• A store owner following a customer of color around the store.  
• Someone crosses to the other side of the street to avoid a person of color.  
• While walking through the halls of the Chemistry building, a professor approaches a post-doctoral student of color to ask if she/he is lost, making the assumption that the person is trying to break into one of the labs. | You are a criminal.  
You are going to steal/you are poor, you do not belong.  
You are dangerous. |
| Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism  
A statement made when bias is denied. | • "I'm not racist. I have several Black friends."
• "As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority."
• To a person of color: "Are you sure you were being followed in the store? I can't believe it." | I could never be racist because I have friends of color.  
Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can't be a racist. I'm like you.  
Denying the personal experience of individuals who experience bias. |
| Myth of Meritocracy  
Statements which assert that race or gender does not play a role in life successes, for example in issues like faculty demographics. | • "I believe the most qualified person should get the job."
• "Of course he’ll get tenure, even though he hasn’t published much—he’s Black!"
• "Men and women have equal opportunities for achievement."
• "Gender plays no part in who we hire."
• "America is the land of opportunity."
• "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough."
• "Affirmative action is racist." | People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race.  
The playing field is even so if women cannot make it, the problem is with them.  
People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder. |

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<td><strong>Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles</strong>&lt;br&gt;The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal/“normal”.</td>
<td>• To an Asian, Latino or Native American: “Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal.” “Speak up more.”&lt;br&gt;• Asking a Black person: “Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down.”&lt;br&gt;• “Why are you always angry?” anytime race is brought up in the classroom discussion.&lt;br&gt;• Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting.</td>
<td>Assimilate to dominant culture.&lt;br&gt;Leave your cultural baggage outside.&lt;br&gt;There is no room for difference.</td>
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<td><strong>Second-Class Citizen</strong>&lt;br&gt;Occurs when a target group member receives differential treatment from the power group; for example, being given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color.</td>
<td>• Faculty of color mistaken for a service worker.&lt;br&gt;• Not wanting to sit by someone because of his/her color.&lt;br&gt;• Female doctor mistaken for a nurse.&lt;br&gt;• Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer.&lt;br&gt;• Saying “You people…”&lt;br&gt;• An advisor assigns a Black post-doctoral student to escort a visiting scientist of the same race even though there are other non-Black scientists in this person’s specific area of research.&lt;br&gt;• An advisor sends an email to another work colleague describing another individual as a “good Black scientist.”&lt;br&gt;• Raising your voice or speaking slowly when addressing a blind student.&lt;br&gt;• In class, an instructor tends to call on male students more frequently than female ones.</td>
<td>People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn’t possibly occupy high status positions.&lt;br&gt;Women occupy nurturing positions.&lt;br&gt;Whites are more valued customers than people of color.&lt;br&gt;You don’t belong. You are a lesser being.</td>
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<td><strong>Sexist/Heterosexist Language</strong>&lt;br&gt;Terms that exclude or degrade women and LGBT persons.</td>
<td>• Use of the pronoun “he” to refer to all people.&lt;br&gt;• Being constantly reminded by a coworker that “we are only women.”&lt;br&gt;• Being forced to choose Male or Female when completing basic forms.&lt;br&gt;• Two options for relationship status: married or single.&lt;br&gt;• A heterosexual man who often hangs out with his female friends more than his male friends is labeled as gay.</td>
<td>Male experience is universal.&lt;br&gt;Female experience is invisible.&lt;br&gt;LGBT categories are not recognized.&lt;br&gt;LGBT partnerships are invisible.&lt;br&gt;Men who do not fit male stereotypes are inferior.</td>
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<td><strong>Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping</strong>&lt;br&gt;Occurs when expectations of traditional roles or stereotypes are conveyed.</td>
<td>• When a female student asks a male professor for extra help on an engineering assignment, he asks “What do you need to work on this for anyway?”&lt;br&gt;“You’re a girl, you don’t have to be good at math.”&lt;br&gt;• A person asks a woman her age and, upon hearing she is 31, looks quickly at her ring finger.&lt;br&gt;• An advisor asks a female student if she is planning on having children while in postdoctoral training.&lt;br&gt;• Shows surprise when a feminine woman turns out to be a lesbian.&lt;br&gt;• Labeling an assertive female committee chair/dean as a “b____.” while describing a male counterpart as a “forceful leader.”&lt;br&gt;• Women are less capable in math and science.&lt;br&gt;Women should be married during child-bearing ages because that is their primary purpose.&lt;br&gt;Women are out of line when they are aggressive.</td>
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