



# WOMEN BELONG IN CONSTRUCTION

By Mittie D. Cannon, Ed.D

Construction is historically viewed as a male-dominated industry, with men having populated the skilled crafts for centuries. The underrepresentation of women in the construction crafts has been a debate and focus of attention for many years. The dream of gender equality is still distant; however, the new dynamic of the 'traditional family' allow for a more diverse workforce.

The U.S. Department of Labor has reported that there are five craftswomen for every 95 craftsmen on most construction sites. The low number of women entering construction crafts has long been a concern for industry leaders. Government involvement in the 1960s opened the construction crafts to women, but women are not entering as expected. I believe part of the reason for the low number of women entering the crafts are the attitudes toward women in construction—they are seen as not having the physical requirements and skills needed to perform the job. These previously held perceptions have proven incorrect, as more women enter construction crafts and show they are equally capable.

In 1996, I began working as an electrical helper. I worked in the field, using my hands and my mind to get the job done for

my employer's clients. While each jobsite was as different as the people who worked there, a central theme invariably resurfaced regarding gender. More often than not, I was treated as if I didn't quite belong until people got to know me. I focused on the work, on my performance and on the performance of my team. In fact, after seeing my work, my co-workers often said, "I wish there were more women like you on the job."

My point is not to flatter myself, but rather to emphasize the critical importance of giving each individual the benefit of the doubt and the gift of your support until she has had time to prove herself. Women's work should be held to the same standards as men's work. By the same token, women should have the same access to workplace opportunities as men.

As I progressed in my career, I was given the opportunity to earn my doctorate in education, with a specialization in curriculum and instruction. My dissertation focused on women in construction and the topic was Exploring Reasons Women Chose to Pursue Entry-Level Construction Trades Employment. I am passionate in my desire to recruit more women to the crafts and have long held the belief that we will only get there through training and education.

Some people think the reason there are so few women in construction is because women don't want construction jobs. My research indicates just the opposite. The majority of construction craftswomen enjoy their jobs, the good wages they earn, the opportunity for advancement, and the feeling of pride they get from the work they do.

In an effort to tackle the low number of women entering the skilled crafts, we must express a genuine concern about the problem. Seeking opportunities to introduce construction to young girls at an early age is significant. This introduction should take place at an age when their minds are most pliable. We also need to enlighten parents through fact-based information and education.

Business/industry partnerships with technical education and outreach programs are other ways companies can teach school-age girls about the career opportunities in construction. For years I have had the honor of leading and directing construction camps for girls. These camps provided young women in the ninth grade an introduction to careers such as welding and electrical. Many of these camp participants pursued enrollment in secondary career technical education programs that focused on the building crafts.

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As the manager of workforce development in the power and industrial division for Robins & Morton, a major EPC firm, I have shared with my employer my commitment to opening doors for women who want to pursue non-traditional roles, and they have pledged their support of my plan to positively impact the low employment numbers. As the manager of workforce development, I have several roles, and some of these roles incorporate my passion in creating a more diverse workforce.

One role is serving as a liaison between training and the project managers who oversee the company's projects to ensure that our jobsite training coordinators give each project the resources needed to provide a safe and skilled workforce for our clients. Drawing on diverse instructor talent from across the company, and using the nationally recognized NCCER curriculum in the classroom, I ensure that our management and craft employees have what they need to do their best

work and reach their full potential. Another less formal role is that of a recruiter. I am always on the lookout for new talent that could strengthen our company and industry. Given that women are the industry's largest untapped workforce resource, it is my personal mission to strengthen the number of women on our projects, in the crafts, in our company and in our industry.

Here are some facts reported by the U.S. Department of Labor on the status of our current workforce:

- The construction industry will need to hire 240,000 new workers each year for the next five years. But only about 150,000 new workers will enter the crafts, creating a continuing shortage of skilled workers.
- If you're a prime or subcontractor working on a federally funded project, 6.9 percent of your workforce in each craft must be female.
- For every four people who retire from

the industry, apprenticeship programs supply only one new person to enter the crafts.

With these types of statistics, I challenge you to take a stand for women in construction and examine your perceptions toward women in our industry. Do you really support, encourage, and promote women in your organization? If not, then please join forces with me in finding ways to recruit and retain women into the crafts, identify marketing strategies that target women and promote women in our industry. It is the right thing to do because the construction industry needs women, and women need opportunity. ■



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