Women in the Trades

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CHANGING THE STIGMA AND CULTURE IN CONSTRUCTION

Walking onto a construction site as a woman means stepping into an environment where silence, humor, and side-comments all carry meaning. Sometimes you could get a surprised "Wow, you're actually strong," or a coworker insisting, "Let me get that, I'd feel bad if you carried it." Other times, it's the heavy quiet and longing stares that follow you around when you're the only woman on the crew.

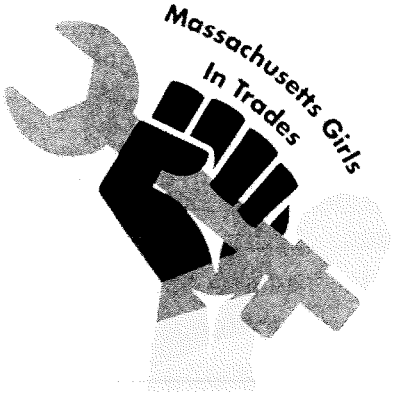
These moments cannot be random because they are rooted in the long, stubborn history of the trades being seen as "men's work," and they reveal how gender expectations still shape everyday interactions on the job. While the construction industry is still very male-dominated, women are rising up in their chosen trades and are not going away. There needs to be a cultural shift and a change in the way women are perceived.

Stigma and Support

Behind every woman who stays in the trades is a system of support. The leaders who speak up, the committees that build community, and the organizations that push back against outdated stereotypes. By transforming the way workers talk, train, and support one another, these groups are shifting the culture of construction from the inside out. What keeps women in the trades isn't luck, nor is it keeping your head down. It is mentorship, shared experiences, storytelling, and the presence of strong female networks that challenge the current male-centered norm and force the industry to change its values. From statewide initiatives like Girls In Trade to each local union women's committee, these organizations foster belonging, build confidence, advocate equity, and make space for women to thrive. Together, they are rewriting what it means to work in the trades and proving that culture can change when people choose to change it.

"Doing Gender on the Job"

Sociologists West and Zimmerman argue that gender is not necessarily something that we are but rather something we continuously *do* throughout our everyday interactions with others. In society, people are constantly held to some standard of gender norms. Unfortunately, the trades make this visible in ways that most jobs just don't. Every comment about strength, every offer to "help" with heavy lifting, every awkward joke about women on the site becomes a small reminder of who people assume belongs in that workspace. These comments and small gestures automatically mark women as out of place in the field. It illuminates how joking, language, and expectations that contribute to occupational segregation can explain why women feel the need to work extra hard to gain respect.



Massachusetts Girls in Trades (MAGIT) is an organization that aims to support female students in vocational schools achieve their goals of becoming a professional trades person

"You don't get by as a woman without knowing another woman in the trades"

Why Do Trades Look the Way They Do

Judith Lorber studied the social construction of gender. In her book, "Night to His Day", Lorber explains, gender is a social institution that organizes work, behavior, and inequality. It is built into school systems, workplaces, and cultural expectations. This means that most young girls never even make it to trade school in the first place, and the ones who do sometimes end up dropping out or leaving the field. Young women are quietly guided to careers that are more "safe", "appropriate", and "feminine". This perspective helps justify the fact that only 4% of unionized tradespeople are female. It was never about a lack of skill. It was always about keeping women out of the field.

From personal experience, I can think of more women than I can count on my fingers who went to trade high schools and then attended college to pursue a degree in the medical, legal, or business fields. Not because they wanted to leave the trades but because their teachers never presented construction as a viable and respectable option. Guidance counselors pushed college pamphlets. And teachers encouraged "backup plans." Even in shop class, the gender expectations were obvious. Whenever something heavy needed to be moved, my welding teacher would automatically call for the "strong boys," even if I was standing right there and fully capable. Being the only girl in a shop of nine students meant constantly being reminded of the limitations that my shop teacher had in his mind about me. Even though I picked up material quicker than the guys, and I was one of the best welders out of my peers, it always felt like my shop teacher couldn't respect me or acknowledge the fact that I did want to join the construction field, and most of my classmates had little to no interest in following the metal fabrication field out of high school.

Lorber's framework makes these moments more than just frustrating memories; it reveals them as examples of how institutions reproduce gender inequality through ordinary, everyday behavior. What seems like a harmless habit, for example, asking only boys to do physical tasks, actually communicates who belongs in hands-on, physical work and who doesn't. When repeated over

years of training, these messages shape entire career paths. They help explain why so few women enter the union trades and why those who do must work harder to be seen as legitimate in a field that was never designed with them in mind.

This ties directly back to Lorber's argument; gender is a system that quietly sorts people into roles long before they reach the workforce. When teachers assume boys are stronger or more suited to hands-on labor, they reinforce the very inequalities that keep women out of male-dominated trades. My welding teacher wasn't just making senseless comments; he was reinforcing a larger social structure in real time. This shows exactly how gender norms continue to push girls away from the trades before they even get the chance to begin.

Thick Skin and First Hand Reality

Hilary S. Lewis, a former transit welder in the Boilermakers Union, wrote a book called Thick Skin: Field Notes From A Sister In The Brotherhood. Through stories, Lewis documents the realities of being a woman in a male-dominated industry; the construction world. Lewis writes about harassment, sisterhood, isolation, and the emotional labor required to keep going in a space built for men. What makes her work so powerful is how clearly it shows the patterns sociologists talk about: gender norms, impression management, and the unspoken rules that shape each interaction. Her stories echo many of the same dynamics women experience today, making her book a bridge between individual experiences and the larger social forces that define life in the trades.

A powerful quote from this book that has always resonated with me is. *"When other women were on the job it made a remarkable difference. One other woman and you are no longer the freak, the anomaly. You have an ally. Three or more, and everything changes. We can no longer be isolated and targeted in the same way... Someone has to organize a second bathroom."* I've seen firsthand how true this is. While the "second bathroom" part is mostly a joke, even though there is truth to it, the quote speaks to the power of not being the only woman. Yet on most crews, I am exactly that; the only one. There is actually a law or something that requires union jobsites in Boston to have at least one female, one person of color, and one Boston resident on each crew. Unfortunately, this can make my presence look more symbolic than skilled. I've even overheard comments implying I'm kept on a job not because I am competent, reliable, or strong, but simply because I fill a quota

Lewis's book becomes even more important when you see how she expresses everyday moments as sociological insight. She talks about her own stories of being on a jobsite, as well as other tradeswomen's experiences. This strengthens the theory about *doing gender.* Her insights into the way men joke, test, or ignore her mirror West & Zimmerman's idea that gender is performed through interactions. Lewis's reflections on being watched, judged, or underestimated fit directly into Goffman's "presentation of self," where every move can become a performance that is shaped by the expectations of other people. Additionally, the way she explains her exhaustion with being reminded of the gender gap reveals the emotional labor that women must constantly carry to survive in a space not built for them.

What makes Lewis's book so useful is that it doesn't just tell us what happens on job sites for female workers but also shows us why these behaviors and actions are always recurring. Her stories illustrate how sexism in the trades isn't always profound or dramatic. But it can be quiet and discreet. Lewis shows how these subtle, everyday interactions add up over time, shaping a woman's sense of belonging or isolation.

"Presentation of Self"

Sociologist Goffman's theory of the *presentation of self* offers a wise lens for understanding how tradeswomen navigate

worksites. Tradeswomen are often judged more harshly than their male counterparts. According to Goffman, people manage how they are perceived by adjusting their behavior, language, and appearance depending on the "stage" they are on. For women in construction, this performance is not optional. It becomes a survival skill. Wearing baggier clothing, tying hair in a bun, and wearing no makeup are ways women can blend in more on the jobsite.

Lewis's experiences, as written in her book, reflect exactly that. On a jobsite, female trade workers are hyperaware that their competence, toughness, and humor are being evaluated from the moment they walk in. Lewis describes altering how she talks, stands, or even reacts to pain because she knows any small misstep can be used to reinforce stereotypes about women being too weak or too sensitive for the job. This aligns with what many tradeswomen experience, myself included. The need to constantly perform confidence and resilience, even on days when we are exhausted.

Goffman helps explain how this performance is both protective and limiting. On one hand, presenting toughness helps women gain credibility and earn respect. On the other, it can force them to hide stress, frustration, or emotional exhaustion. These are emotions that men can express freely without it being seen as a negative reflection of their capability. The pressure to maintain a flawless "front stage" self adds another layer of labor that women carry with them every day. The emotional wear and tear that women endure from physical work with added anxiety from potentially being overlooked or silenced in the workplace is mentally draining.

Rosie the Riveter was created by J. Howard Miller as the symbol of women's contributions to the workforce during World War II. Now she is an iconic image that empowers women to become anything they want.

The Social Construction of Gender

The challenges tradeswomen face are not just individualized experiences; they stem from gender itself being socially crafted. The sociologists mentioned previously explain that gender is something we *do*, not something we just *are*. It's a set of expectations and rules that we must perform every day because society rewards or punishes us based on how well we follow the script.

In the trades, this script is especially conservative. "Real" construction workers are expected to be physically tough, emotionally quiet, and male. Because these norms are treated as natural, any woman who steps onto a jobsite is marked as an outlier before she even picks up a tool. Gender rules, such as being physically tough or hiding vulnerability, are still strongly governed in the trades.

Tradeswomen, such as myself, feel an obligation to join in the movement to reshape the culture within construction and the conversations surrounding it. In doing that, women are expanding the outreach for younger people, especially interested female students. Molding the future of the trades from the inside out.

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