

Dismantling Gender Walls in the Construction Industry

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According to the national construction industry trade association Associated Builders and Contractors, construction labor demands are high. The construction business pays well and offers great opportunities for progression. The traditionally male-dominated industry has struggled, however, to convince women to join its workforce.

Little has changed in construction workplaces in the 40 years since the novelty of the real-life story of a construction worker-welder by day and dancer by night captured our fascination in the “Flashdance” movie. Even today, women constitute just a small fraction of the construction industry. Indeed, women numbered just 10.9 percent of the entire U.S. construction workforce in 2022, according to the [National Association of Women in Construction](#) and the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Being outnumbered 9-1 on average, even a self-assured and driven woman may feel like an outsider in such a sea of men. Hiring women into the trades, however, often improves teamwork, attention to detail, jobsite cleanliness, and organization, as well as safety performance.

Earning respect as a woman in this field can be daunting. On-site chauvinism is a legitimate concern. Half of female construction workers reported they had experienced some form of gender inequity, according to one 2022 [report](#). Complaints of an unwelcoming work environment in the construction industry are not uncommon. Those grievances may include women reporting they have to work harder to earn respect than their male counterparts doing the same thing. There may also be a prevalent undercurrent of unsolicited conduct of a sexual nature in this work environment. Add alcohol to the mix in after-hours socializing, particularly at remote work sites, and there could be a perfect storm for sex-based provocations often resulting in he-said/she-said-type claims. Women in such a male-dominated field who complain are also frequently concerned about reprisals. When employers take such concerns seriously and promptly and thoroughly address the issues, however, women are more likely to come forward and succeed. With a robust policy and multiple avenues to address such concerns, as well as regular annual training on these issues, an employer can root out sexism, showing it is doing more than just paying lip service to policies prohibiting discrimination and harassment.

Deliberate workplace considerations can improve the intimidating work environment many women face working in construction. Bathroom facilities stocked with feminine hygiene products and a discrete way to dispose of them is a good start. Likewise, properly fitted workwear and equipment geared for women is important.

Equality is a focus around job safety. At the 2023 ABA OSHA conference in San Diego, California, one of the enforcement priorities outlined by Director Scott Ketchum (OSHA Directorate of Construction) was to [ensure that personal protective equipment \(PPE\) used in construction fits women](#). PPE must fit properly to effectively protect an employee from the hazard for which it was designed. There has been progress in the availability of PPE for women across a full range of sizes, including smaller-sized boots and hard hats, according to

the International Safety Equipment Association.

Additionally, there is some progress developing in this sector with respect to compensation. While women in the U.S. workforce earn on average 82.9 percent of what men make, the gender pay gap is significantly smaller in construction occupations. According to the National Association of Women in Construction, women earn on average 99 percent of what men make in the same roles.

Women have been making substantial strides in construction lines of work. There is still plenty of room, however, to build in more diversity, equity, and inclusion. The industry is becoming increasingly more approachable for a wider community of minorities. The recipe for success in attracting more women into the construction business is to overcome the masculine stereotypes with leadership committed to making the aim for diversity a reality. The keys to overcoming gender barriers in construction include starting early with role modeling of women in construction, recruiting women into trade schools, choosing words wisely in job descriptions, placing women in construction jobs that are meaningful, leveraging technology to improve retention, and providing ongoing networking and support to women once hired. Revisiting these business practices will make it less difficult for women, and everyone in the construction industry, to succeed.

Please contact a Jackson Lewis attorney with any questions.

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