

A Woman's Guide to Survival in the Building Trades

Practical advice to women who plan to work in the trades — from one who took the leap

BY CHERYL MAGLOSKY

Editor's note: In recent years, women have become increasingly involved in the construction trades. This article is written specifically for those women who put on their belts each day, and gives a woman's perspective on what it's like to work in an industry traditionally staffed by men. In the face of labor shortages and changes in the labor pool, it should also provide useful insights for any contractor who hires, or is expecting to hire, women workers.



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My mother sure never trained me to be a carpenter, and I think it's safe to say that most women who have entered non-traditional trades were not prepared for the challenges and rewards of their chosen professions. This article is intended to share some of the hard-earned experience and knowledge of a few women in the construction field.

Hip Power

In overall body build, women tend to be smaller than men. Because of this disparity in size, it is not uncommon for a woman to be told that she is not able to safely and competently perform strenuous work. But the differences in physical ability between women and men need not imply limitations.

While men rely primarily on upper-body strength, a woman's body is designed to more easily carry loads on her hips. To carry lumber, for example, the load is held close to the body, and the weight is supported by the muscles in the pelvis and legs. This technique is usually adequate for most job site tasks. But when carrying heavy items with a male partner, I may have to ask him to lower the object if he is picking it up high.

The way I use (and choose) my tools has also evolved to fit my body. I regularly depend on crow bars, side handles on drills, the biggest screwdriver I can find, a piece of pipe slipped over the end of a wrench for added leverage, and a block of wood under a hammer head to assist in nail pulling. I always try to brace myself against a wall, or other stationary object, when drilling or screwing through dense material. And because I don't have the upper-arm strength to work for extended periods of time over my head, I will use a ladder as often as possible to get as much additional height as I can. This way I can brace a Sawzall against my hip, for example, or throw my full body weight behind a drill.

Often, telling a male coworker that you can't carry a heavy load on your shoulders, or that you need to get a ladder for a job, is the hardest obstacle to overcome. Finding a way to get a new job done is especially hard because often the easiest way to learn an unfamiliar task is to mimic a coworker. But many times I have been discouraged to find that a man's technique doesn't work for me. At this point, the best technique is often to back off for a moment and try to figure out an approach that works easily and safely, regardless of how it may seem to others.

The brain is by far the most important tool for a tradeswoman to engage. Along with using creativity and common sense, I also rely on balance, leverage, good posture, and maintenance of good health (including regular stretching and aerobic exercise).

Code Penode, a self-employed cabinet and furniture maker, depends on a well-thought-out setup in her trade. She regularly moves material about her shop alone. She uses a dolly to transport heavy loads and most of her shop machinery sits on mobile bases that enable her to move the tools safely and easily. "I never muscle plywood. It's always balanced on the dolly, and I can move my Powermatic joiner from my rocking chair," she says.

Dorothy Forsyth, a plumber, says that spending a moment to think about a task before doing it is

important. Questions like, How can I use my whole body effectively? or Will I need a second pair of hands? are essential to working efficiently, she says. "Recipes," she adds, "first list all the ingredients, and then the instructions." In the same way, a woman must know what she will need on site before she performs her work.

Forsyth points out that women who enter the trades bring with them a variety of important skills that initially may not seem to have much to do with their work. For example, if you're raised to be a homemaker, she says, you've been brought up to be prepared and organized.

Other tradeswomen I interviewed added to this last sentiment, saying their participation in athletics, training by other tradeswomen, and receiving suggestions from smaller or supportive men with whom they worked, were all important ways that helped them learn how to use their bodies as effective tools.

Working Pregnant

Of special concern to some tradeswomen are the occupational hazards of working during pregnancy. Reproductive health hazards include exposure to toxic chemicals, extreme noise or temperatures, tool vibration, and job-related stress. Chemical hazards, in particular, can often cause the greatest danger to a fetus during the first three months of pregnancy. Sometimes this can be before a woman even knows she's pregnant, so if you plan on pregnancy, it's especially important to use safe work habits at all times.

Inevitably, pregnant women in the field ask: Is it safe to work? How long do I work? When do I tell my employer? There are no simple answers to these questions. A woman's health, her specific working conditions, her financial circumstances, and the pregnancy benefits offered to her will be factors she will have to balance. I have known women who worked into their eighth month of pregnancy, but they did so under the supervision of a health practitioner.

When you tell an employer that you're pregnant will often depend on what formal rules a contractor sets and what maternity benefits are provided. Women should get information on pregnancy benefits when they are hired, so that their privacy and emotional safety can be maintained later while making a decision about how long to work.

Dress for Success

Heavy work pants, boots, T-shirts, and flannels seem to be standard clothing for everybody in the trades. But tradeswomen soon find out that the selection in work clothing is narrowed by what's available, and what's considered acceptable.

Work boots are especially hard to find, particularly the steel-toed variety. I know of only two companies — Red Wing and Carolina — that make steel-toed work boots in women's sizes.

How women dress in a male work environment is an important issue. Many women earning a living in non-traditional occupations dress in ways to avoid, or at least minimize, unwanted attention or harassment.



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This often means wearing loose-fitting T-shirts and pants that will de-emphasize hips and breasts.

Other women, however, feel their comfort is unfairly restricted by having to dress in response to male coworkers, especially in hot weather. When deciding what work clothing is best, I assess the particular job site, and balance it against my need for physical comfort and a sense of safety. What serves me well at one location may need to be changed on another job site because of subs or changes in personnel.

Bigger Barriers

No matter how we dress or what our job performance, nearly every tradeswoman finds herself the target of sexual or sex-based harassment at some point in her career. Sexual harassment is any unwanted sexual contact including pinching, “friendly” pats, or brushing; an advance or request for sexual favors (acquiescence may be an implicit or explicit condition for continued employment or advancement); or any other verbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature (lewd jokes, innuendoes, leering, gestures). Whether it be an explicit sexual proposition, or a “polluted environment” created by slurs about a woman’s sexuality or the display of derogatory images of women, sexual harassment is often crippling to a woman’s performance.

Sex-based harassment is any negative treatment directed at a person’s sex. Behavior such as being deliberately ignored or ostracized by male coworkers, being prohibited from doing a task that is too “unladylike,” or

unjustifiable scrutiny of your job performance are all forms of sex-based harassment that create an environment that is unwelcoming at best and hostile in the extreme. All of these can interfere with a worker’s ability to perform her job safely and satisfactorily.

What do you do in response to this unwanted behavior? Often a quick response can diffuse the situation and keep it from escalating. For example, when asked, “When are you going to wear a bikini on the job site?” one tradeswoman responded, “When you wear one, I’ll wear one.”

Whether or not humor is your *forté*, it’s important to object. Don’t think it’s your fault. It’s illegal to sexually harass someone, so you have some basic rights.

I have found that discussing harassment and isolation with other tradeswomen — even those who aren’t my coworkers — has been very helpful. The National Tradeswoman Network (c/o Chicago Women in the Trades, 37 S. Ashland Ave., Chicago, IL 60607; 312/942-0802) welcomes contacts from worker’s support groups and may be able to provide you with a listing of contacts in your area. I also read *Tradeswoman* (P.O. Box 40664, San Francisco, CA 94140; 415/821-7334), a magazine written specifically for women doing non-traditional work, as a source of inspiration, encouragement, and support. ■

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