



Building Equal Opportunity
Chicago Women in Trades
1455 S. Michigan, Ste. 210
Chicago, IL 60605
(P) 312-942-1444
(F) 312-942-0802
www.chicagowomenintradeg.org
cwitinfo@cwit2.org

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Finding Sisterhood the Reasons have Changed, but Many are Joining Women-Only Organizations

Laurie Casey, Chicago Tribune
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Women's History Month.

Myra Bradwell passed the Illinois state bar examination with high honors; still she was not admitted to the bar. The year was 1869. The impediment? Her gender.

At the time, Illinois did not allow women into the courtroom to serve on a jury, much less argue a case. Bradwell sued and lost. In an 8-1 decision, U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Joseph Bradley wrote, "The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life."

Bradwell didn't get mad. Or even. Instead, she got organized. She joined a group of women and men who in 1872 successfully lobbied the Illinois General Assembly to pass a law barring employers from discriminating on the basis of sex--the first in the nation. She helped organize Chicago's first women's suffrage convention and became involved in a network of women's political, social and professional organizations, including the Illinois Women's Press Association, which she founded in 1885.

This was the heyday of women's organizations, said Rima Lunin Schultz, historian and co-editor of "Women Building Chicago 1790- 1990," a biographical dictionary due out this spring from Indiana University Press. Millions of women like Bradwell joined groups for women lawyers, teachers, social workers, doctors and writers, determined to fight their way into professions that were the province of men.

"In the first period of feminism, the issues were so basic and comprehensive, women were starting almost from zero," Schultz said. "Just speaking in public was a big step for women. They used club meetings to get ready to enter the public sphere."

In the 130 years since Bradwell's fight, women have carved a space for themselves in the working world. They are now accepted in every type of professional organization--the American

Medical Association elected its first woman president in 1998. So where does that leave women-only professional organizations?

The issues have changed and membership isn't what it used to be, but women-only professional organizations still fill a niche, often in professions where women are still battling the old bugaboos of discrimination and harassment.

In the construction trades, for example, where less than 10 percent of workers are women, simply getting hired can be a challenge for women, said Lauren Sugerman, president of Chicago Women in Trades, a non-profit organization representing women in construction, such as machinists, plumbers and pipefitters.

"Our numbers are so low in this field. We belong to this organization to show our strength and unity," said Sugerman, a former elevator constructor who co-founded Chicago Women in Trades 20 years ago. "Emphasis on sisterhood has always been important here. Once you get in, you keep the door open for others. That's the importance of women's organizations."

The 150 members of her organization share coping strategies against harassment and discrimination, help each other deal with isolation and pass along information about job opportunities.

Sugerman said that members gain a lot of support just by meeting other women who do work like them--"so we can feel we haven't made a choice that was foolish and outlandish."

Even in fields in which both genders are well represented, women-only groups deal with perhaps subtler challenges--such as the wage gap, the glass ceiling, and balancing work and family life.

In the law field, for example, "women don't have problems getting entry-level jobs," said Karen J. Dimond, assistant attorney general for Illinois and president of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois. "They have problems moving up through the ranks to get those highly sought-after partnerships."

According to Dimond, many law firms set job expectations such as 80-hour work weeks that effectively prohibit working mothers from advancing. Women join WBAI because they "share unique experiences with other women lawyers," she said, "and the organization provides an opportunity to share knowledge and advice on how to handle particular situations."

In the technology field, some women's organizations have found a natural way to negotiate around the time crunch: the Internet. There's no more schlepping to evening monthly meetings--just tap out an e-mail message and hit the send button.

"You can throw a message on a listserv and basically have your problem solved within hours," said Liz Ryan, founder of Chicago Women in Technology (ChicWIT) and vice president of Ucentric Systems, a home networking company in Boston and Chicago.

In the technology field, membership in women's professional organizations is growing robustly. Chicago Webgrlls, an organization begun in 1996, has nearly 1,800 members.

A new group, DigitalEve Chicago, started last fall. And ChicWIT, which began in July 1999, has more than 2,000 members.

Ryan believes some see the technology field as more woman- friendly because schedules often are more flexible and companies are more open to promoting women to higher ranks.

But "we're definitely not there," said Ryan, pointing to the "sticky floor" phenomenon. "You have whole pink-collar ghettos where women are toiling away, such as Web design. Women are having trouble getting past the lower rungs."

Some say women-only organizations will never die because of a timeless attraction: camaraderie.

"I belong to the state society [Wisconsin Institute of CPAs], but my heart is really with this group," said Cheryl Pfundtner, a member of the Milwaukee chapter of the American Society of Women Accountants and a legal specialist at Quarles & Brady LLP. "There's not that competitiveness in our group. We freely share our expertise and build networks and ties."

Shirley Ochoa, president of Springfield-based Illinois Federation of Business and Professional Women, agrees. While membership has declined since record highs about 30 years ago, women tend to join the organization today to find sisterhood.

"Women have realized it's important to bond with other women," she said. "They're looking for a release from their day-to-day jobs."

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