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## **Why Are All the Workmen . . . Men?**

Mary Ellen Slayter, Washington Post Staff Writer  
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Since I bought my first house three months ago, a 59-year-old fixer-upper in the Brookland neighborhood of Washington, I've had to work with a stream of contractors.

None of them women.

As a feminist, I often go out of my way to give my business to other women, especially in nontraditional fields. No matter how hard I looked, however, I wouldn't have been able to find many female contractors.

Not when only 2.4 percent of the 6.3 million people working in the construction trades in 2001 in the United States were women, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. With percentages that low, the only woman likely to be working on my house is me.

These occupations, which include plumbers, carpenters, electricians, roofers, general contractors and other skilled crafts, pay pretty well. For example, the median pay for an electrician in the Washington metro area is \$20.69 an hour. Electricians' helpers average \$12.03 an hour -- certainly better than the \$10.29 parceled out to nurses' aides, a field composed 90 percent of women.

The economic incentive to pursue this work is obviously there, so why aren't more women picking up a voltage tester?

Patricia Jones, executive director of Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW) in New York, says women who want to go into the trades must overcome several layers of prejudice, starting when they are girls.

They also face a tough work environment. Sexual harassment is still a problem on job sites, she said, but the main obstacle is that you have to reestablish yourself every time you show up at a new work site. This is especially stressful when you're the only woman at the job. You'll be lucky if they even have a separate Porta-John for you.

Gayle Nelson-Blomquist, director of development for Chicago Women in Trades, said the biggest problems are lack of knowledge about the fields, women underestimating their own skills

and an absence of role models. Even if you offer vocational training to girls, if they don't see anyone who looks like them doing it, they aren't likely to picture themselves doing it either, she said.

Overcoming women's lack of knowledge about the building trades and bias against women in the field isn't easy, but efforts are being made. The Labor Department works with several community organizations and labor unions to increase women's participation in the skilled trades.

NEW, for example, which receives a Labor Department grant, provides basic construction education to the women eligible for their programs. The organization's 12-week, full-time "Blue Collar Prep" program, for example, provides hands-on classes in carpentry, basic electricity, plumbing and blueprint reading. It also trains women in safety practices, catches them up on basic math and makes sure they meet the physical-fitness requirements of the trade.

Once women have basic skills, NEW helps them find formal apprentice programs with local unions. Apprenticeships are the tickets to good jobs.

A typical apprenticeship for an electrician, for example, lasts four to five years. An apprentice can expect at least 144 hours of classroom time each year, and 8,000 hours of on-the-job training over the course of the training, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In the classroom, apprentices learn blueprint reading, electrical theory, electronics, electrical code requirements and safety practices. On the job, under the supervision of experienced electricians, apprentices must prove that they've mastered the skills. When all this training is complete, apprentices take licensing exams, which certify them to work in a particular state. In Maryland, for example, to qualify to take the "master electrician" exam you must have seven years of experience working under a master electrician.

The tradeswoman organizations aim to increase the number of women with high-level skills, in the hopes that they will sponsor more female apprentices.

NEW's Jones said her group wants to build "a critical mass of women, so we can look out for each other."

Maybe then I can get some help with my handywoman's special.

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