There can be no doubt that the past year has been historic—bringing us a once in a generation pandemic, worldwide protests against continued racism/white supremacy after the on-screen murder of George Floyd, and an ongoing economic crisis fueled by the pandemic. Working women especially in March 2021 find themselves at the intersection of historic firsts—the first woman (and woman of color) was elected to serve as Vice-President of the United States, and historic setbacks—pandemic job losses are disproportionately affecting women and continue to illustrate the critical (and primarily unpaid) roles women play in keeping our families functioning and educating our children.

Tradeswomen entered 2021 with many of the same challenges and goals of ALL working women—stay safe from the virus while providing for our families’ physical, social and educational needs. We had to continue “bringing home the bacon” while learning how to teach school. We had to continue helping provide for our parents and grandparents health and safety—while at the same time trying to maintain our own. Yes, these have indeed been challenging times.

Yet, tradeswomen and their allies are also continuing to challenge the status quo with the goal of increasing the number of women in non-traditional union careers. Around 40 years ago, women began to formally demand access to jobs in the construction industry. Prior to 1980 women made up less than 1% of the construction workforce. Today women make up only around 3%. The goal of increasing the number of women working in the skilled trades remains the challenge of pre-apprenticeship programs like the Technical Opportunities Program at Chicago Women in Trades.

Sexism and other forms of discrimination continue to adversely impact women seeking training and employment in almost any of the skilled trades. This week celebrates Women in Construction, and CWIT’s new report, Here to Stay: Black, Latina and Afro-Latina Women in Construction Trades Apprenticeships and Employment offers compelling stories to share about tradeswomen’s experiences, opportunities and challenges.

The report also offers recommendations for the Office of Apprenticeship and industry leaders on how to best address the intersection of race and gender in a male-dominated workplace. At a time when Federal policymakers are finally getting serious about investing in infrastructure and jobs in construction are projected to grow at all levels, it is imperative that apprenticeship programs expand to include more Black, Latina, and Afro-Latina women.

Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT) has spent the past 40 years recruiting, training, advising, counseling, organizing and advocating for women who want to gain access to these well-paid jobs. CWIT continues to #ChoosetoChallenge the status quo in all industries that deny women access. We want to #ChoosetoChallenge all forms of discrimination, sexism, sexual harassment and other obstacles that prevent women from gaining employment in this sector.

We remain committed, after 40 years, to our original mission and remain convinced that achieving these goals is more important than now than ever before.