



# HERE TO STAY: BLACK, LATINA, AND AFRO-LATINA WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION TRADES APPRENTICESHIPS AND EMPLOYMENT

## INTRODUCTION

The skilled construction trades provide opportunities to build careers that are both challenging and fulfilling, pay a family sustaining wage with benefits, and can be accessed through ‘learn as you earn’ apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships are particularly common in the unionized sector of the construction industry, where contractors and unions jointly run and fund apprenticeship programs.

Such registered apprenticeships (RAPS) provide paid employment from Day One, incremental wage increases, standardized instruction, and industry recognized credentials validated by the U.S. Department of Labor or state apprenticeship offices.<sup>1</sup>

The COVID crisis has put a spotlight on the concentration of Black, Latina, and Afro-Latina women in low-wage jobs, including in many essential healthcare and retail jobs. These low-wage jobs do not allow workers to build significant savings or other forms of wealth which would help them and their families to be economically secure during economic downturns such as the current COVID-19 recession. The skilled construction trades have given many women an alternative to the poorly paid jobs in the service sector that many had to turn to before finding the trades. More than a quarter of a million women—291,000—work as electricians, carpenters, laborers, masons, plumbers, painters, sheet metal and iron workers, and other jobs in trades.<sup>2</sup>





The average weekly earnings for women construction trades workers covered by a union contract in 2018 were \$1,134<sup>3</sup> higher than the median weekly earnings of women elementary and middle school teachers, and much higher than in many other traditionally female occupations.<sup>4</sup> The average hourly wage of a nursing care assistant in the state of Illinois is \$13.85<sup>5</sup>; the starting hourly wage of a first year plumbing apprentice in Chicago is \$17.35 plus benefits, after which it will rise every six months; a journey level plumber—someone who completed their 5 year apprenticeship—can expect to earn \$51 per hour.<sup>6</sup>

The female construction workforce is very diverse and is growing more diverse from the bottom up. A new generation of Black, Latina, and other women apprentices have joined the industry with the support of organizations such as Chicago Women in the Trades (CWIT), Non-traditional Employment for Women (NEW) in New York, ANEW, and other women-focused pre-apprenticeship programs.<sup>7</sup> Between 2016 and 2019, the growth in the number of women apprentices has outpaced growth in the number of male apprentices. The number of Latina women apprentices in federally-registered apprentice-

ships has grown by almost 1000, almost doubling, and the number of Black women apprentices by more than 750, growing by over 50 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, women of all backgrounds remain severely under-represented in such well-paid jobs. In 2019 women were just 3.5 percent of workers in construction occupations, and just 3.6 percent of all apprentices in federally registered apprentices in the trades.<sup>9</sup>

Working in the trades can be difficult, particularly for women of color. Being a woman in the trades typically means finding yourself isolated from other women, lacking role models and mentors who look like you, and having to carry the weight of representing not only your gender but also women from your racial and ethnic backgrounds, in addition to having to deal with sometimes hostile attitudes and discrimination on the job. Given their low share of all construction worker jobs means that Latinas have just slightly more, and Black women substantially less, than a one-in-a-hundred chance to work with another Latina or Black woman on a building site.<sup>10</sup>

This brief talks about what it is like for Black women and Latinas to work in the trades as they navigate working in a male-dominated industry, and what can be done to support their recruitment, retention, and success. It draws on seven focus groups with unionized Black, Latina, and Afro-Latina tradeswomen from across the country who were selected to represent the new generation of trades workers, having completed at least two years of an apprenticeship but no more than three years as a fully qualified journey-level worker.<sup>11</sup> The brief amplifies what attracts and encourages Black women and Latinas to stay in the trades, in spite of the many challenges they face, and then highlights some of the challenges they face. It concludes with recommendations for registered apprenticeship programs (RAPS) on best policies and practices for creating a diverse and inclusive workforce and specific supports for women of color in the trades. While these recommendations focus on RAPs, many of the recommendations are transferrable to contractors, employers, and training programs.



## SUMMARY

- Latinas and Black women are joining the construction trades in growing numbers: the number of Latina apprentices in the trades almost doubled, and the number of Black women apprentices grew by almost 50 percent between 2016 and 2019.
- Yet, because women's numbers in the trades remain very low—just 3.5 percent of construction workers are women—Latinas have about a 1-in-100 chance to work with another Latina, and Black women have less than a 1-in-100 chance to work with another Black woman in the trades.
- Latinas and Black women say that they work in the trades because registered apprenticeships and jobs in construction provides good wages with benefits like health insurance, and because they love the work and can be a role model for others.
- Yet, many report persistent issues of discrimination, particularly during apprenticeships, such as fewer opportunities to develop their skills than White male apprentices, less access to overtime, and unsafe working conditions because work gear and tools do not fit women's sizes, as well as harassment and disparagement.
- There are still many problems facing Black, Latina, and Afro-Latina women in the trades, but promising policy solutions include women-focused pre-apprenticeship programs, employment targets with consistent oversight, and support networks of other tradeswomen.



## Why Construction is for Us:

### In Their Own Words

Becoming a tradeswoman can be hard. What makes women persist is that the trades offer benefits that they do not find in other careers. These include earnings high enough to be self-sufficient and no longer having to rely on public supports, health insurance for themselves and their families, and more intangible benefits like setting an example for their children and the pride and joy of doing their jobs well.

Another benefit is home ownership. Due to past and present discriminatory treatment in the labor and housing markets, Black, Latina, and Afro-Latina women are much less likely than their White counterparts to be able to afford to purchase a home for themselves and their families.<sup>12</sup> Earnings in the trades have made home ownership an option. A Latina apprentice described what this meant for her:



“I’m a single mother and I have to provide for my kids. My oldest just graduated college. And I helped pay for her school. I have a 16-year-old and a 10-year-old and nobody really knows this, but I just bought a house a month ago. My house is still a mess, but it’s my house, and it’s my mess. Without the trades I wouldn’t have ever accomplished this.”

A Black apprentice also attributes her ability to own her own home to being in the trades:

“I experienced homelessness at the beginning of my apprenticeship. But also through my apprenticeship I now have my own home.”

A Latina journeywoman who is purchasing a home of her own emphasized the importance of this for setting an example for her nieces:

“I’m in the process of buying a house. All of my sisters are stay-at-home moms. I’m going to show my nieces that you could do something other and buy your own house.”

Women also appreciate the benefits available in the trades. The COVID crisis has highlighted the desperate inequality in health insurance coverage and access to quality health care.<sup>13</sup> Health insurance and pension contributions are standard benefits in the trades for workers covered by union contracts, for apprentices and journey level workers. A Black apprentice described her experience:

“I recently was really sick. I just got a statement from that stay in the hospital and it was, like, half a million dollars. I was, ‘Oh, my God. What if I didn’t have—’ The fact that I have a bill that large, and I don’t have any out-of-pocket expenses is a blessing. And now I have my daughter and so the fact that she has those benefits, it’s a blessing.”

In addition to economic security there is the sheer pride and joy of doing a job well. A Latina journeywoman explained her motivation:



"My daughter, she has a sense of pride now because she knows that her mom is an electrician. I always take pictures of the work that I have done. When I show it to her she's, 'Oh, my goodness. You did that?'"

A Latina apprentice discussed the joy and satisfaction she gets from the work:

"I love my job, I love the challenge, I love the fact [that] in my job we do a lot of problem solving in my trade, every minute, every task we have there's problem solving, nothing ever fits right, nothing ever works. I love that part, I love the fact that we change sites, that I get to jump from jobsite to jobsite, finish it, once it's done you go somewhere else. And the reason why I stay is because I'm good at what I do."

A Black journeywoman shared a similar sentiment:

"I don't think I have had a point where I wanted to quit because I love what I do. Even when I don't like the people, I still love the job. It's not really about them. It's about me making myself better and becoming better."

Finally, because the construction trades do not discriminate against those with a criminal record but allows them to earn a living wage, they provide a real opportunity to start over and build a new life. A Latina journeywoman describes how prison set her on the path that has allowed her to make a legitimate career out of something that had always interested her:

"I liked to take things apart and put them back together, and I'm talking about whole cars. I was just tweaking but I knew that's what I wanted to do, something with my hands. Because I went in for burglary and stealing cars, so it's kind of like tools is what I was into. And [the vocational training program in prison] was like, 'Oh, you like to use your hands,' so they gave me a list of apprenticeships."



Another Latina journeywoman described what it meant for her:

"I was actually the first female to graduate the [pre-apprenticeship] program in Prison and I kind of took a leadership position in there. They pay a year of union dues when you get out and they buy your tools and your apprentice book—so the prison, my bad path, got me in."

For these women, the construction trades were a lifeline to a career that would allow them to be self-sufficient and provide them with a sense of pride in themselves and the work they do.

## Let me in: How Black Women and Latinas Gain Access to the Construction Trades

Tradeswomen face many barriers to getting into the trades, including lack of information about opportunities in the trades, how to access those opportunities, stereotypes about what is appropriate work for women, and outright opposition to women in the trades from some co-workers.

While some Black, Latina, and Afro-Latina tradeswomen were able to follow their family members into the trades, many of the women interviewed did not have those connections and/or faced skepticism if not outright hostility when they started to pursue such careers. When a Latina apprentice, whose family is originally from Mexico, told her family that she wanted to pursue a career in the trades, the response was, "What? That's

for men. What are you doing? You're not going to go through this." She reflected that this negative attitude—that this is **"not a woman's job"**—is common in the Mexican culture. Yet, as she recounts it, the backlash she received from her family just made her think, "You just watch me and I'm going to do it."

For others, negative attitudes came from their school. A Black apprentice recalls the discouragement she faced at school, "When I was going to high school, I wanted to do auto mechanics. They told me I couldn't." A Latina apprentice describes that it had simply never occurred to her that someone like her—quite petite—could ever be in the trades until someone referred her to a women-only pre-apprenticeship program, Chicago Women in Trades:

"I didn't even know about the ironworkers or carpenters or pipefitters or anything like that. I didn't think I could make it because of my size, because I always pictured these big guys doing that stuff."

A Black apprentice made the point that that trades could learn from other organizations where women are underrepresented:

"I think that when you look at the military, the police department, the fire department, they recruit high schoolers. [They] go into the high schools and let these young ladies know that they have an option besides going to college or maybe going in the military."

## Your Blues Ain't Like Mine: Barriers, Hardships, and Harassment

Attitudes toward women in the trades have undergone significant change over the last 30 years as women have increased their presence in the construction trades. Despite the progress that has occurred, many Black, Latina, and Afro-Latina tradeswomen described some work environments as being less than welcoming with ongoing discrimination and harassment which made it difficult for them to develop the skills they need and be successful in their chosen trade.

One of the first difficulties is isolation—being the only woman, and possibly the only person of color at work and thus, whether the gaze is friendly or hostile, under constant observation. A Latina apprentice explained that



"In the last four years, this is my 11th job, and I've been the only female except for one of the jobs."

Another Latina apprentice about to journey out reflects on her anxiety when she started out in the trades.

"As a woman you have like a double minority stamp. I'm a woman of color, but I'm also a woman. They don't question male apprentices; they are like, 'Oh, he's here to learn.' [But] as a woman, as soon as you step on the field or into the shop, they're like, 'What is she here for?' So in the beginning, I had a little bit more anxiety with it."

A clear symbol of not being welcomed—as well as a serious inconvenience and a potential health hazard—is the absence of bathrooms for women. One consequence is that tradeswomen often must travel long distances to use a bathroom. One Black apprentice contrasted her experience with that of her male co-workers:

"Guys go around the corner because there's guys' bathrooms everywhere. My bathroom, albeit separate as it should be, I got to go to East Bumblechester, you know, and almost split my bladder before I get there to go to the bathroom."

Tradeswomen also face health and safety challenges from frequently being asked to work with tools and safety equipment that are designed as if all construction workers were the size of (fairly large) men. One Black apprentice explained what that means for her, and for her productivity:

"Bigger tools aren't really built for a woman to actually operate. So some of the jobs I know I could do if the tool was shaped in a different way. I would be able to wield it myself and not have to, you know, [say] 'I can't do that job because that tool is not built for me.'"

Working mostly as the only woman on a worksite means that often it is not clear whether you get treated



differently because you are a woman, or because you are Black or Brown or both. Some women reported experiences of being treated differently from White women on the site where White women were not complicit. A Black apprentice provides the following example:

"I'm working at a shop, and [there is] a White woman (though she's a good person). She's a second-year apprentice, and I'm a fifth year, and they will talk to her [giving her direction] as if I'm not standing there. It got to the point I'm just like, 'You know, hey! What was that?' Because I had to know the plan, too."

A Black apprentice reported her frustration with a different type of bias she frequently encounters.

"[When problems come up, the attitude is] Me: go figure it out; her: let her ask. That bothered me and I just felt like it was—I guess that old motto still stands that, you know, black women are stronger; they can endure more. So you want to put me through the wringer. But this little white girl, right, you know, we are going to take care of her."





## On-the-Job Training (Not)

The on-the-job learning component is a crucial part of an apprenticeship, and apprentices rely on more experienced tradespeople to teach the skills of their trade. Yet, whether from outright discrimination and harassment or well-meaning paternalism, **many women reported that they did not get the same level of training and work experience as other male apprentices**, limiting their career and earning prospects in the industry once they completed the apprenticeship, and depriving the industry of fully rounded workers.

A Black apprentice and immigrant described her experience:

“As a third-year apprentice I want to learn more, but when they saw me, like the first day, they started giving me little jobs. Other apprentices came. They were working with their tools, and I was still doing fire stopping and materials. So I went to the shop steward and told him about that, that I was doing fire stopping as a third-year apprentice and a first-year apprentice was doing conduit work. So they sent me to another foreman [and he was like] ‘Are you legal in the country?’ Or, ‘You need speech for your accent.’ Things like that. And I became so drained. I became depressed and I thought, ‘Oh, my God, this is not for me.’”

Another Black apprentice recounted how even though she was three years ahead of a White male apprentice, he got more opportunities to learn new tools and tasks than she did:

“I was at the shop [...] and another second-year, a White male was doing things that would make him better, like prefabbing carriers, like wall-hung toilets. [...] And they had me [do basic stuff like] cutting pipe and sorting out fittings.”

These experiences were common across tradeswomen and are particularly problematic because by the time they journeyed out they had not developed the skills

Other women described how being the only or one of a few Black or Latina tradeswomen led to their being disrespected. A Black tradeswoman shared this experience:

“When you’re a Black woman walking in and [the foremen] sees you and he knows you’re an apprentice and he’s like, ‘Oh, God. We must have needed a woman minority City resident.’ [I’m like] ‘No, I actually know how to weld.’”

These experiences take a toll. While for some women it strengthens their resolve to remain in the trades, others leave the trades, but all the women expressed feelings of turmoil, anguish, and pain at having to deal with these hardships in addition to mastering their trade. A Latina tradeswoman explained her experience this way:

“There were a lot of moments, mostly in my apprenticeship, when I was being hazed. There were moments when I came home, and I just cried my eyes out. Ah those moments sucked. This guy Paul, I think it was my first year of apprenticeship, he told me, ‘I hate niggers and I hate spics.’ And I was like, ‘You know what, you have the right to your opinion and whatever you think.’ Because I knew he wanted a reaction. I was like, ‘There’s no fucking way I’m leaving now. You want me to leave, and I’m not going to give you the satisfaction.’”



expected of a journey-level tradeswoman. A Black journeywoman explained her frustration:

“When I was an apprentice, I got to do layout, which not a lot of people get to do. But that’s a majority of [what] I did for three years of my apprenticeship. What carpenter apprentice—or what carpenter—only knows how to do one thing? None. I see a first year [apprentice], he was doing shaft work, and he was doing drywall, then he was doing ceilings. And I’m like, ‘Well, I’ve just been doing layout. When am I going to get to do that?’”

A Latina journeywoman described how these training deficits impacted her career trajectory:

“So now as a journey level when I get dispatched to a job I’m expected to do journey level work. How am I going to do journey level work if in my apprenticeship I didn’t do this type of work? [Because of this lack of comprehensive training] now as a journey level I have fewer options instead of more.”

Learning can also be reduced by male co-workers who may just want to be helpful. Tradeswomen described the need to decline offers of assistance to ensure they learn the skills they will need while not offending their more-experienced colleagues who they might have to rely on to complete projects. A Latina 4<sup>th</sup> year apprentice provides an example:

“There are some really nice guys and they’re like, ‘Oh, let me get this for you, let me get this for you,’ and I’m like, ‘Uh-uh, do not get that for me. Thank you for being a gentleman.’ People watch, they’re looking, they’re always watching, and if they see someone helping me too much then they think I can’t do it.”

While some men want to step in and help, others constantly challenge and require tradeswomen to prove themselves and to show that they can do the job and that they’re serious about being in the trades. A Black apprentice describes her experience:

“Most of the time when I do have a problem with a guy it’s because I haven’t been really working with him. It’s like you’re being interviewed all over again. Like you have to prove to him that you know exactly what you’re doing [and that] you’re not someone that’s going to be there and not do the work or try to get other people to do your work for you.”

For women apprentices, predominantly male work sites mean that they cannot simply focus on learning their trade. Instead, they have to pay just as much attention to learning how to interact with often less than supportive male co-workers.

## We are all paid the same but...

One of the benefits of working on a union site is that pay rates are clear and open to everyone, male or female. But discrimination can still creep in, such as in decisions about who gets access to overtime. A Black apprentice described how this leads to a gender pay gap:

“The thing about the union is we’re all equal. If you’re working with [another] third-year apprentice, that third-year apprentice is making the same amount of money [per hour] as you. But the reality is that if it’s a male third-year apprentice, he may bank more money than you this year based on overtime alone.”



Another Black female apprentice explained it this way:

"It seems like women must fight to advance and to learn new aspects of the trade that men automatically get to do. Just for me to get overtime on Saturdays was like... I had to ask my male partner to ask the foreman for me, to kind of like vouch for me to say, 'Yeah, she could do it.' Other than that, women don't get overtime."

## Sexual Harassment

As a sign of progress perhaps, many of the women interviewed did not report sexual harassment as a major issue. Yet, those who experienced harassment, particularly apprentices, often feel that they have few options to formally address such behavior because of the threat of retaliation. A Black apprentice described an incident in which a male co-worker that she had turned down for a date tried to touch her:

"When we got to the last floor, it was just me and him. And we got the shipment off and we were heading back downstairs and he slapped me on my ass. My instinct, like, naturally, you assaulted me, my first instinct is to assault you back. So, I turned around and I swung at him."



Yet, she did not report the incident to her foreman, explaining that:

"Nine times out of ten, I'm probably going to be the one to get moved to another job just so that they can keep him there because they need him. I'm an apprentice. I felt kind of expendable at that point. What, I'm going to get a lawsuit, get some money and then what? Am I going to have a job to come to? Or am I going to be blackballed in the business? [They will say] 'She likes to sue.'"

Above all, such incidents can really undermine the trust and feeling of fellowship at work. Another Black apprentice described how much she was impacted by being harassed, this time over the phone:

"I was at a different shop [and trade from the guy]. For some reason he felt the need to call my phone. It was real late at night, so I didn't answer, but the next day I got a voicemail from him and his friends laughing, he said, 'Aunt Jemima, ain't y'all, you know you tired of smelling the dogs on my granddad's farm?' Said I could suck up him and his friends. It was just past disturbing, the fact that I was working this close one-on-one with a person that felt like this the whole time."

## Shouldn't You Be At Home?

Traditional attitudes to women's roles are another barrier encountered by many women, with male co-workers who indicated that they think a tradeswoman's place is at home raising their families. Such attitudes can hit women whether they have children or not. A Latina journeywoman—who happens to be single and does not have kids—recalls being told:

"You shouldn't be here, you should be at home with your kids. Your husband should be at work."

Some of the tradeswomen described changes over time in the attitudes of some of the men they worked with. A Black journeywoman described this exchange she had with a business agent:



"A business agent told me one time, 'You know what? I'm going to tell you the truth. I don't believe women belong in this trade.' I said, 'There are whole lot of Mother F-ing men that don't belong in this trade.' And he looked up in the air and he looked at me and he goes, 'You're right. I know I'm right. I work with them every day. He said because of me, he changed his mind about women in the trades. So now he's one of the biggest advocates for the women.'"

## Being a Mother in the Trades

Most women participating in the discussions do not have children, or only joined the trades once their children were older. The working environment in construction is often difficult, only a few unions—such as the Ironworkers—have started to offer paid maternity leave to address the fact that the heavy physical work in construction may make it particularly difficult to work through a pregnancy without risking the health of the mother or baby.<sup>14</sup>

Working and commuting times that require leaving the house well before child care centers are open, and frequently changing work sites can also be particularly challenging for those who have young children (and no one at home with a more stable work schedule, something fathers working in the trades are much more likely to be able to take for granted). Whether you find childcare that allows you to work may depend on luck—such as having relatives who may help out. A Latina journeywoman explained how fortunate she was to have a sister running a daycare:

"My sister runs a daycare, so I was able to drop my child off at six or five in the morning if I had to, but if my sister didn't run a daycare, I don't know what I would have done."

Yet, having to rely on informal care from family and friends can also be very unreliable. A Black journeywoman described her less positive experience of having to depend on paying family members for childcare while she completed her training:

"When I got an apprenticeship, it was the hardest time because I'm paying family members to babysit, I am buying food for the house, but it still didn't matter. They'd say, 'Well, I don't feel like it tonight.' How are you going to tell me tonight, and I got to go to class and I'm paying you? 'Well, I don't feel like it.' So at one point I had to tell my kids, look, all we got is each other. Y'all going to be in this house while I go to school. Just do not let the youngest girl go in the kitchen because she might burn herself."

This highlights the importance of childcare during the hours of training or work for women with small children. Even when children are in school, however, being able to take time off to pick children up from school if they are ill or when you have to meet with school personnel can trigger stereotypes or implicit biases of women with children. A Latina apprentice described her struggle:

"That phone call *kids are sick*, depending on who you're working with, it may or may not be frowned upon. 'Why are you answering your phone? What is this—do you need to leave? Is this too much for you? Can you deal with this?'"

While it is important for tradeswomen to have access to reliable childcare, it is equally important for them to have flexibility to care for their children when childcare isn't enough. Because some managers or supervisors may assume that women with children are less reliable than men with children or that they are less committed than their male counterparts, when women do ask for time off to care for their children, this bias can be reinforced further disadvantaging women trying to enter the trades.

## What Helped Women Succeed in the Trades

Many women discussed how their male co-workers supported and looked out for them as they learned their trade. Those who have been in the trades the longest spoke about the improvements they have seen in their unions, the greater diversity of leadership positions, and a likelihood of working with other women. They describe unions that have become increasingly diverse in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and immigrant status. One tradeswoman could point to herself as the first Black woman to be an officer in her union. Another woman spoke about her particularly positive experience of working under a Black foreman, and another woman talked about how uplifting it was recently to work for the first multiracial woman foreman she had ever seen. These tradeswomen want to see more women, more Black women and more Latinas as supervisors, and foremen, as general contractors, and in the leadership of their unions but they are also encouraged to see change happening. They also pointed to the vital role of pre-apprenticeship programs for their success, the positive role of commitments to goals and diversity (when these are taken seriously, and women not just treated as tokens), and last but not least, the essential role of sisterhood in the trades.

## Women-focused Pre-Apprenticeship Programs Provide Information, Basic Skills, Supports, and Sisterhood

Behind every successful tradeswoman interviewed for this project were the resources of an organization such as Chicago Women in Trades, Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), Tradeswomen Inc. and similar women-focused pre-apprenticeship programs across the country.<sup>15</sup> Federal and state support for programs and technical assistance targeted at improving women's access to well-paid male-dominated jobs such as the U.S. Department of Labor's WANTO program and the Apprenticeship Diversity grants have played a crucial role

by supporting women-focused pre-apprenticeship programs and providing new and established tradeswomen with information, resources, mentoring, and support.

Women-focused pre-apprenticeship programs helped women break down stereotypes of who works in the construction trades and build their self-esteem, provide peer networks—including networks specifically set up by and for Black or Hispanic women in the trades, provide role models, and help women figure out strategies for surviving and thriving in an environment dominated by White males. These programs set them up with the basic skills needed to enter an apprenticeship—such as help them improve their spatial and mechanical aptitude and learn math and test-taking skills—and helped them identify a trade and apprenticeship to pursue.<sup>16</sup>

Women-focused pre-apprenticeship programs are also working closely with apprenticeship programs, con-





tractors, and other industry stakeholders to improve pathways into and retention prospects for women in the trades. Increasingly, these stakeholders recognize the important role played by such programs and integrate them into their pipelines for recruitment. A Black apprentice recalls the critical support she received from NEW.

*"If it wasn't for NEW, I wouldn't be here because I had stood on many lines and filled out many applications [to get into a union apprenticeship program]. One local [union apprenticeship program] didn't even look at my application twice [but] they sent me a pamphlet for NEW."*

Working in the trades can involve substantial start-up costs, such as access to reliable transportation to get to work sites on time, having start-up funds for tools and work clothes, and help with finding and funding child-care for those with young children. Pre-apprenticeship programs offer case management and help with identifying resources to tackle the start-up costs of working in the trades.

Pre-apprenticeship programs offer a range of supports in addition to these financial supports including case management and a life skills curriculum which includes managing family and work balance, self-esteem, and basics such as getting to work on time. A Black apprentice describes her experience:

*"NEW didn't just offer construction skills, they offer, like, life skills. I came with some type of construction background, so it was actually the other side of NEW that I benefited from the most."*

Retention of apprenticeships in the highway trades has improved dramatically in the state of Oregon since the state started to provide subsidies to apprentices to allay the costs of buying tools, transportation, and childcare; the impact of these supports on the completion of apprenticeships by women of color has been particularly strong.<sup>17</sup> Legislation securing the funding and commitment to this program was developed with the support

## WOMEN BENEFIT FROM PREPARATORY PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE:

- A safe and supportive place for:
  - breaking through stereotypes
  - overcoming fear of the unknown
  - Trying and practicing new things
  - Peer networking and support
- Strategies for surviving and thriving in a white, male-dominated environment
- Building physical fitness: aerobics, strength training, agility
- Balancing work/ family
- Exposure to work and tools
- Spatial and Mechanical Aptitude
- Math and test taking prep
- Strong case management services that support women's ability to enter and succeed in apprenticeships and provide linkage to supportive services that address housing, domestic violence, childcare needs
- Resources that support financial needs to enter apprenticeship: application fees, dues, tool/clothing costs, transportation

of tradeswomen from the pre-apprenticeship program Oregon Tradeswomen in Portland.<sup>18</sup>

## Targets and Goals Matter

Federally-funded construction trades have been subject to targets for women's employment ever since 1978. While these goals are often ignored, several women reported how they had benefitted when such goals were taken seriously, for example anchoring commitments to meeting gender and diversity targets in Project Labor Agreements. The impact went beyond simply having work to being on a worksite where they were not the only woman or only person of color.

A Latina apprentice describes the wonderful experience of working on a site that is committed to diversity:

"I think that for the most part, in every job I've been the only woman. Last year, it was the only job I worked on, at one point there were ten women at the jobsite and the only reason was because we were building a Chicago Public School, so we had laborers, we had plumbers, we had electricians and we had pipefitters, it was like ten of us at one point. And I had never, ever seen that, I was like, and I don't think I'll ever see that in my life [again]."

## Building Community

Last, but not least, opportunities to network and support each other have grown through social media, Facebook groups for tradeswomen, and the annual Tradeswomen Build Nations conference (which in 2019 brought together over 2,700 women). While tradeswomen experience isolation on the job, they draw on their resources to build their networks—they set up regular informal dinners to provide each other with encouragement and support and they establish support networks through social media. Together, these changes

have made the trades a much more comfortable and welcoming place for tradeswomen. There is still a lot of work that must be done to ensure Black, Latina, and Afro-Latina tradeswomen have the same opportunities and access to the same resources as their White male counterparts, but that change has been underway as expressed by a Black tradeswoman:

"We have a Women's Conference every year, called Women Build Nations. And I swear to you, I was under the impression that I was the only one until I went to that conference, and it's just like, 'Why is she telling my story to me?' It was the same story! Just a different city and state, the same story! And I was like, 'You know what? Whoa! I'm not the only one going through this. It's a bigger issue than what I thought.' Because my philosophy for a lot of things had been you're overreacting. You have to suck it up!"

## Building Momentum: Policies and Practices to Help Grow the Numbers of Black, Latina, and Afro-Latina Tradeswomen

While there are clear signs of progress, isolation, discrimination, and the fear of retaliation continue to characterize the experiences of far too many women working in the trades. Apprenticeship programs, unions, contractors, owners, and developers can—and must—do more to ensure that the experiences of discrimination, disrespect, and disregard recounted in the brief are eradicated. The following are recommendations for apprenticeship programs and their sponsors on policy and best practices to ensure the success of women of color in the construction skilled trades.



## BEST PRACTICES FOR ENSURING EQUITY AND INCLUSION FOR WOMEN OF COLOR IN APPRENTICESHIP:

### Apprenticeship programs should:

1. Make their best efforts to **meet annually updated numeric participation and retention goals for women of color** and provide transparency with public reporting of achievements toward these goals.
2. **Ensure that apprenticeship programs and sponsor's work sites are inclusive, equitable,** and free from bullying, hazing or harassment. This should include establishing clear policy, providing effective, on-going respectful-workplace and anti-harassment training, and ongoing promotion of the program's commitment to equity and inclusion.
3. **Ensure equitable training** that supports inclusive and gender-neutral instruction practices in the classroom and in on-the-job training, and monitors for non-discrimination in work assignments and the number of work hours accrued annually.
4. Establish mentorship programs and **identify an ombudsperson** who can provide support and assistance to women of color and can mediate issues of equity and inclusion.
5. **Build linkages to pre-apprenticeship programs and community-based training organizations** that can connect women of color to supportive services to enter and succeed in apprenticeship, including:
  - a) Preparatory training to meet entry requirements of apprenticeship programs
  - b) Childcare, assistance with transportation, and assistance with work-related tools or clothes
  - c) Retention services such as peer networking and support groups
  - d) Support for application fees and other costs of entering registered apprenticeship programs and required pre-employment training.
6. **Registered Apprenticeship Programs should establish an Equity and Inclusion Committee** that meets regularly to review these recommendations and evaluate policies and best practices to ensure that equity and inclusion goals are helping the apprenticeship program and its sponsors achieve success in recruiting and retaining women of color.
7. **Ensure Compliance with Apprenticeship EEO Regulations**, (29 CFR Part 30)

## ENDNOTES

1. United States Department of Labor. 2020. "Registered Apprenticeship Program." <<https://www.apprenticeship.gov/employers/registered-apprenticeship-program>> (accessed October 2020).
2. IWPR calculations based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020. Table 11. Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, <<https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>>.
3. Men's median weekly earnings were just slightly higher, at \$1,172, based on analysis of 2016-2018 Current Population Survey data; see Ariane Hegewisch and Tanima Ahmed. 2019. "Growing the Numbers of Women in the Trades: Building Equity and Inclusion Through Pre-Apprenticeship Programs." National Center for Women's Equity in Employment and Apprenticeships at Chicago Women and the Trades, <<http://womensequitycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Growing-the-Number-in-the-Trades.pdf>> (accessed August 2020).
4. In 2018, the median weekly earnings of women 'elementary and middle school teachers' were \$982, and those of all women \$789 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018. Household Data Annual Averages. Table 39. "Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by detailed occupation and sex." <<http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.htm>> (accessed March 2019).
5. O\*NET On-Line. 2020. Summary Report for: 31-1014.00 - Nursing Assistants" <<https://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/31-1014.00>> (accessed October 2020).
6. See Plumbers Local 130. 2019. APPENDIX C "Wage Rates and Fringe Benefits and Payroll." June 1, 2019 through May 31, 2020 <[http://www.plumberslu130ua.com/ULWSiteResources/uallocal130\\_v2/Resources/file/CBA-Wage-Rates/Plumbers/WSA/2019-2020%20WSA%20Wage%20Rate%20Sheet.pdf](http://www.plumberslu130ua.com/ULWSiteResources/uallocal130_v2/Resources/file/CBA-Wage-Rates/Plumbers/WSA/2019-2020%20WSA%20Wage%20Rate%20Sheet.pdf)> (accessed October 2020).
7. The Gender Equality in Apprenticeship Partnership is coordinated by Chicago Women in the Trades (CWIT) and also includes the following organizations providing pre-apprenticeship training to women and Technical Assistance to employers, contractors, educators, and apprenticeship programs about growing the diversity of apprenticeships: ANEW (Seattle), Northeast Center for Tradeswomen's Equity (NCTE), Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW, New York), Oregon Tradeswomen (OTW), Tradeswomen Inc. (TWI, Northern California), West Virginia Women Work (WVWW), Women in Construction at Moore Community House (WinC, Mississippi), as well as the Institute for Women's Policy Research.
8. IWPR analysis of .Apprentices in states covered by the Registered Apprenticeship Sponsor Information Database (RAPIDS); RAPIDS is maintained by the federal office of apprenticeship and stores data from registered apprenticeship programs in the following 25 states: AL, AR, CA, CO, GA, ID, IL, IN, IA, MI, MS, MO, NE, NJ, ND, OH, OK, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VT, WV, WY.
9. 2,193 of these apprentices in 2019 were Black women and 2,059 were Latinas (0.7 % and 0.6% respectively of all apprentices in the trades in 2019; source as note above.
10. Of the female workforce in construction, Hispanic women are overrepresented compared to their share of the total female workforce, while White, Black, Asian, and other groups are underrepresented; this is similar for the male workforce. In 2016-2018, of women working in construction trades 32% were Hispanic, 8% Black, 55% White non-Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 2% more than one race/other; see Hegewisch and Ahmed. 2019, note 3 above.
11. The eight on-line focus groups were conducted remotely between June and August 2020; 27 women participated, including 16 Black women apprentices and journeywomen and 11 Latina apprentices and journeywomen. There were two moderators for each of the focus group interviews—one from the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) and one from the Chicago Women in the Trades (CWIT). Participants were recruited through women-only pre-apprenticeship programs and networks of Black and Latina tradeswomen; all participants work in the union construction sector. The pre-apprenticeship programs that referred women for participation were Chicago Women in the Trades (CWIT) in Chicago, Non-traditional Employment for Women (NEW) in New York, and Tradeswomen Inc. in California. All interviews were transcribed before being coded for common themes. The goal for the interviews was to better understand how women gained access to the construction trades, what barriers they faced as they entered the trades and what factors helped them overcome these barriers and remain in the trades.
12. See for example Richard Rothstein. 2017. *The Color of Law: A forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America*; New York, NY: Liveright Publishing; and Sarah Strochak, Caitlin Young, and Alanna McCargo. 2019. 'Mapping the Hispanic Homeownership gap.' Washington DC: the Urban Institute <<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/mapping-hispanic-homeownership-gap>> (accessed August 2020).



13. See for example Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. "Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups." July 24; <<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>> (accessed August 2020).
14. See Ariane Hegewisch. 2019. "Pregnancy and Maternity in the Trades: Good Practices for Apprentices." National Center for Women's Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment at Chicago Women in the Trades. <<http://womensequitycenter.org/best-practices/>>.
15. See note 9 above.
16. The National Center for Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment at CWIT provides examples of the services and impact of women-focused pre-apprenticeship programs, see <<http://womensequitycenter.org/best-practices/>> (accessed August 2020).
17. Supports in Oregon are available to apprentices in five highway related trades, carpenters, cement masons, iron-workers, laborers, and operating engineers; the impact on retention and completion has been dramatic, most strongly for women of color. Completion rates for women of color receiving support services were 58%, compared with 26% for those who did not receive supports; see in Lindsey Wilkinson and Maura Kelly. 2018. *Continuing to Build a More Diverse Workforce in the Highway Trades: 2018 Evaluation of the ODOT/BOLI Highway Construction Workforce Development Program*. Final report submitted to the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries and Oregon Department of Transportation. Available at <[https://pdx-scholar.library.pdx.edu/soc\\_fac/96/](https://pdx-scholar.library.pdx.edu/soc_fac/96/)> (accessed August 2020).
18. Hegewisch, Ariane, Jane M. Henrici, Elyse Shaw, and Thomas Hooper. 2014. *Untapped Resources, Untapped Labor Pool: Using Federal Highway Funds to Prepare Women for Careers in Construction*. Washington, DC: The Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/untapped-resources-untapped-labor-pool?searchterm=Untapped.>>

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**Chicago Women in Trades' Equity Resource Center** offers support through customized technical assistance, resources and materials to increase your capacity to recruit and retain women through our broad network of subject matter experts. To learn more about how we can support your diversity and inclusion efforts please contact us at [cwit.org](mailto:cwit.org) [consulting@cwit.org](mailto:consulting@cwit.org). Thank you, we look forward to working with you!