



We'll Call You

IF WE NEED YOU

Experiences
of Women
Working
Construction

SUSAN EISENBERG

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*Experiences of Women
Working Construction*

Susan Eisenberg

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WE'LL CALL YOU
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Also by Susan Eisenberg:

It's a Good Thing I'm Not Macho

Pioneering: Poems from the Construction Site

*f*or tradeswomen
*f*past, present, future
and for Zoe and Simon

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S. E.

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Thumbnail Sketch

Working the steel and seeing a building
rise from the ground
is right up there with giving birth.
To know that your quality of work
ensures the safety of so many people in a high-rise
gives a feeling of satisfaction unlike any other.

—Gay Wilkinson

I had a good motivating force to try it,
because there was a lady in the office,
nice little short lady. She was stooped over,
had one of those little curved hunches in her back.
I took a good look at her one day and I said to myself,
I don't want to be like that twenty or thirty years from now.

—Gloria Flowers

They see that women can do it, they see that women
are good at it—I had this expectation that barriers
would just fall away. I mean in the first few years
it was increasing. At least five, six women per class.
One year there were ten or something. It was like—
whoa! Daddy! This is very exciting!

—Sara Driscoll

Is my desire to change this industry
so that it's not such a hostile place for women
worth it? Is it worth my life? Is it worth being crippled?
Is it worth all the psychological harm? Sometimes you say,
yes, it is. If I don't do it, who is going to do it?

—*Cynthia Long*

Maybe the job that they got coming up, I can do
a little better than you. Do you ever think of that?
That we may be equal to doing work
but there might be one more thing that I do
better than you and I got kept because I can do that.
Maybe I can tape and paint and you can only paint.
So they're keeping me because they can use me more,
not the fact because I'm a girl. If you sit down
and sift through it you might find the real reason
why I got kept and not you.

—*Deb Williams*

Introduction

When I began my electrical apprenticeship in 1978 with Local 103 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, I felt very lucky. I was going to learn a trade that would challenge me both physically and intellectually and would earn me a solid income. I would have the protection and camaraderie of belonging to a labor union. I would be part of a historic social and economic effort to open higher-paying skilled trades jobs to women—initiated and supported by the federal government, in recognition both of women’s economic responsibilities and of the full range of our capabilities.

In April 1978, the Department of Labor under President Jimmy Carter set hiring goals and timetables for hiring women on federally funded construction projects on a trade-by-trade basis. These goals were to increase over a three-year period to 6.9 percent of the workforce. Additional regulations established that women should make up between a fifth and a fourth of each apprenticeship class. I just assumed that these guidelines which had opened doors for me would continue to be enforced and to increase the number of women in the industry.

The regulations established in 1978 blueprinted a course for the construction workforce just past the start of the millennium to become about one quarter female, making the occupation no longer a nontraditional one for women. This is not what happened. Women’s overall percentage of the construction workforce grew to roughly two percent in the early 1980s and remained there.

As a new apprentice I also believed that the many capable tradeswomen who came into the industry would, by force of our positive example, disprove the notion that construction was by nature “men’s work.” I believed that our accomplishments would inspire the gatekeepers to welcome other women, to see the *absence* of women in the skilled trades as illogical, archaic, silly—an inequity to correct.

But they didn’t. Despite many examples of tradeswomen who were skilled, conscientious, and productive workers, despite many efforts by tradeswomen as individuals and through grassroots organizations to expand the participation and retention of women, the culture and the workforce composition of the traditionally male industry have remained fairly intact. It seemed that a tradeswoman’s performance

could become cause for other women's exclusion, but not for their inclusion. The myth that *no* women were capable of skilled trades work was replaced by the Myth of the Exceptional Woman, the disconnection of any successful woman from the rest of her gender.

The industry has made adjustments in response to external factors such as new laws governing sexual harassment and pregnancy disability in the workplace. And a token percentage of women have been able to build financially successful and satisfying careers in the skilled trades. But the promise created by Executive Order 11246, that access to these higher paid blue-collar jobs would create a viable career option for a significant number of women, has not been realized. For women, the pioneering phase of breaking into union construction was not followed by a critical mass of settlers. Instead, pioneering, contrary to its meaning, became a seemingly permanent condition.

Such an enormous disparity between goal and result requires explanation. I found the most common of these very troubling: that once women realized the work was difficult or dirty, they decided it wasn't for them and left. That women are not capable of the work. That although an opportunity was offered to women on a silver platter, there was no interest. These answers matched neither my own experience nor what I had heard from other tradeswomen through countless conversations on jobsites, at conferences, or when I'd traveled with my poetry.

I began in 1991 to gather oral histories of thirty women from ten states and the District of Columbia who were among the first in their union locals in five trades—carpenters, electricians, ironworkers, painters, and plumbers. A third of the group are women of color. One left the trades after two months, while another became senior business representative of her local. By documenting and considering the experiences of other tradeswomen, I hoped to better understand what happened to me and the moment of history I have been part of—especially why there weren't more of us.

The first interview was at Thanksgiving, 1991. It's been a long process that has depended on the help of a great many people: grassroots tradeswomen's organizations who helped me locate tradeswomen in their area; individuals who picked me up at an airport, put me on a bus, or welcomed me into their homes; grantors who sometimes widened their guidelines to give this project support.

But most of all I am deeply grateful to the women I interviewed, who generously undertook the sometimes difficult emotional journey of bringing me back with them to the beginnings of their careers in construction. I am indebted to those women and to many others in the tradeswomen community for the countless conversations, the shared ideas, and the encouragement that were crucial to bringing this book to completion.

I knew from the outset that I wanted this book to convey the perceptions that tradeswomen share with each other. What has always struck me as problematic is

the lack of working tradeswomen at the policy table. I asked every woman I interviewed, given that the entrance of women was a brand-new experience for the industry, was your advice on how to incorporate women requested? Not one said yes. So the book ends with suggestions, less definitive than the punch list of uncompleted tasks handed to a contractor at the end of a job. But I hope that those thoughts, and the book itself, will contribute to a conversation about what would be required to make a historically male industry truly as hospitable to woman as it is to men. Since I believe that conversation belongs in the public arena, I have tried to write the book to be understandable even by readers with no experience at all in the trades.

Rather than organizing the book so that each chapter is about a different woman, I arranged it thematically, beginning with women's decisions to enter the industry. The main character essentially becomes the movement of tradeswomen as a whole through the industry—not always of one mind, as one sometimes even argues with oneself. I hope this arrangement helps the reader to resist the temptation simply to glorify and romanticize these women, and to focus instead on identifying the many points at which the progressive agenda became derailed, and on imagining solutions. Rereading the 1978 federal guidelines in detail, I was surprised at their forethought and how well they did address—on paper—many of the problems to come.

It is particularly important to hear the perspectives of these women now, when “welfare reform” again places high on the public agenda the issue of how women will earn a living wage for themselves and their families. It is also important, at this moment in the global economy when the workforce is becoming increasingly temporary, to examine this industry where work has always been temporary, to see how cycles of layoffs and hirings can serve to mask discrimination by gender and race.

In the interviews and in editing and arranging them for this book, I tried to draw on my training in the trades, in women's studies, and, most of all, in poetry. I tried to hear the significance of what each woman was saying within the context of the industry, the social and economic historical moment, and her own personal life, which carries imprints from all of that. When our differences made it hard for me to grasp what they were trying to tell, women were extraordinarily patient.

In translating from a transcription of oral language to a more readable written format, I have tried to keep in mind what I learned from Denise Levertov about listening to the human thought process. I noticed how often in telling a story a woman would weave back and add in another thread, or rework her language. I have tried to keep in some of those digressions, and when editing down, to select the last choice a person made in phrasing. I have occasionally rearranged the order of sentences for clarity. In paring down, I have been aware that the eye is less tolerant to words on a page than the ear is to a live human voice. I have tried to maintain in written form the energy and integrity of spoken language.

Of the thirty women interviewed, twenty-eight appear in the book. One woman chose not to appear; another, painter Rae Sovereign, I chose not to include because she always worked maintenance, not construction. I thank them both for widening my understanding. All but one woman has chosen to be identified by her own name.

Although every woman I spoke to humbled me by her courage and intelligence, I believe any thirty women from those trades and those times would also have amazing stories to tell and thoughtful perceptions to share. Other than fitting specific criteria, the process for selecting the women I interviewed was essentially a random one. Likewise, in the chapter on Exceptional Men, each one stands for many. Any individuals, union locals, or contractors mentioned are also emblematic of situations occurring at the time. Some names are indicated with only a letter, to emphasize that this book's intention is not to paint villains or heroes (or heroines), but to identify the framework in which this on-going story of women's journey through the construction site gate takes place. I hope the reader will understand as well why some women have chosen to stay in the industry as why some have chosen to leave, and how very complex this issue is.

As I write this introduction, the IBEW is planning its first-ever national women's conference, in September 1997. I hope that this book adds to the discussion beginning to percolate in so many arenas about what it would take from all of us to remove gender barriers from the workplace. Construction is a publicly visible and inherently dramatic industry, but the problems women have faced there will, I suspect, find a resonance of familiarity even with women who work in fields and under conditions that are starkly different.