

A close-up, profile view of a woman wearing a yellow hard hat and clear safety glasses. She is looking towards the right. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a construction site with blue structural elements.

A FUTURE WORTH BUILDING

What Tradeswomen
Say about the
Change They Need
in the Construction
Industry



**INSTITUTE
FOR WOMEN'S
POLICY
RESEARCH**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Work in the construction trades can mean a high-paying, family-sustaining career with health care and pension benefits, accessed through learn-while-you-earn apprenticeships rather than college degrees and student debt. In 2020, over 300,000 women—the largest number ever—worked in construction occupations, reflecting growth even during the COVID-19 pandemic. But women remain highly underrepresented in the trades, accounting for just 4 percent of all workers in construction occupations. Women’s low share of construction jobs represents failures to recruit *and* to retain those who are recruited. This lack of gender diversity is costly to women because they will be much less likely than men to benefit from the substantial public funds that will likely be invested in infrastructure over the coming decade. The lack of diversity also hurts the construction industry, which is already struggling with recruitment difficulties and an aging workforce. To build a sustainable workforce for the future, the industry must recruit women from all racial and ethnic backgrounds and ensure that they can stay and thrive in the industry.

This report draws on the 2021 IWPR Tradeswomen’s Retention and Advancement Survey—answered by 2,635 tradeswomen and non-binary tradespeople—to examine what helps and hinders their advancement in the trades, and what needs to change to help the construction industry build and sustain a skilled workforce that reflects the population and needs of the 21st century. IWPR administered the survey in the winter of 2021 through networks of tradeswomen, tradeswomen’s organizations, union women’s committees, and social media. While the survey is not random and therefore not a representative sample of the national tradeswoman population, it reflects a diversity of experiences across age, race and ethnicity, education, sexuality, parental status, trade, qualification, union membership, sector, and geography.¹

The report seeks to provide advocates, policymakers, and industry stakeholders with evidence-based research findings to improve the advancement and retention of women and non-binary people in the trades. To date, most policies have focused on improving women’s access to the trades. This report addresses improvements that should be made to ensure that women who entered the trades want to stay and can prosper. The report fills an important gap in the research by examining tradeswomen and non-binary tradespeople’s insights and experiences on what drew them to the trades, what it is like to work in the trades, what might drive them out, and what helps them stay. The report also examines the experiences of parents and apprentices in the trades. The report concludes with recommendations for improving women’s advancement and retention in the trades.

¹ Union members and respondents from states with tradeswomen’s organizations are overrepresented.

Key Takeaways

The report shows just how important and transformative a career in the trades can be, while also highlighting that workplace culture and practices need to change if the industry wants to attract and retain women.

The tradeswomen workforce is very diverse.

- Tradeswomen are a very diverse group, and this is reflected in responses to the survey. Of the 2,635 respondents, 17.8 percent identified as Latina, 15.5 percent as Black, 5.0 percent as Asian American and Pacific Islanders, 4.2 as Native American, and 54.3 as White.
- Parenthood is common among survey respondents. Half (50.0%) have children younger than 18, and more than one in five (21.9 percent) have children younger than six. Single mothers make up one in four (25.0 percent) of those with kids under 18.

While many tradeswomen feel respected and well-treated, still others face discrimination and harassment.

- Many women who work in the trades feel respected and enjoy their work and their community of co-workers. At the same time, far too many tradeswomen (47.7 percent) report that they are held to a different standard than their men co-workers, face discrimination in many aspects of their work, and sometimes contend with an unsupportive if not hostile work environment.
- Harassment is a constant for too many. More than a quarter of respondents (26.5 percent) report that they are always or frequently harassed just for being a woman; 23.6 percent report always or frequently face sexual harassment; 21.0 percent of women of color report that they are always or frequently racially harassed; and 19.0 percent of LGBTQ respondents say that they always or frequently face harassment based on sexual orientation.

Lack of respect, discrimination, and harassment are driving too many women out of the trades.

- If the industry wants to improve the retention of women, it needs to tackle unequal treatment. More than four in ten respondents (44.4 percent) say that they have seriously considered leaving the industry. For those, lack of respect or discrimination is the most cited reason for wanting to leave, with 47.2 percent rating it very important.
- Respondents also report being frustrated about the lack of effective follow-up when issues are raised. Almost four in ten respondents who are thinking about leaving the trades say that the problems they raised were not taken seriously (38.8 percent).

For parents, difficulties with finding child care and lack of supports during pregnancy and maternity are the most important reasons for considering leaving the trades.

- The large percentage of mothers among respondents suggests that it is problematic to assume that just becoming a parent will cause women to leave the industry. The majority of those with children younger than six (55.1 percent) or with children under 18 (59.7 percent) have not considered leaving the trades.

- But lack of work-family supports pushes out many tradeswomen. Among parents with children under 18 who seriously considered leaving the trades, more than two-thirds (69.3 percent) mention difficulties finding child care, and almost as many (63.4 percent) mention lack of pregnancy accommodations as very or somewhat important reasons for leaving. Notably, these also rank highly as reasons for leaving among tradeswomen who are younger than 35 and do not have children.

Apprentices—the new generation of skilled tradespeople—are increasingly diverse by gender and race. Many face a concerning lack of equal treatment at work and in training.

- Between 2016 and 2019, women's numbers grew more strongly than men's for apprentices in each major racial and ethnic group. Despite strong growth, only 3.6 percent of all construction trade apprentices were women.
- Inequity at the core of the apprenticeship model makes it harder for apprentices to become fully skilled workers. Over one in five respondents (21.6 percent) report that they are rarely or never treated equally with men on work assignments, and just under one-fifth (19.4 percent) report lack of equal treatment when it comes to on-the-job training.

The tradeswomen community, support from their union locals, and policies to create more inclusive workplaces are key to success.

- Respondents point to many factors that help them succeed in the trades, including supports from their union local (described as "very important" by 45.9 percent of union members), union women's committees and tradeswomen's organizations (by 32.6 percent), and participation in a women-focused pre-apprenticeship program (by 42.4 percent of women who attended such programs).
- Workplace policies (e.g., anti-harassment policies) were identified as "very important" to success in the trades by over four in ten respondents (44.6 percent), followed by having an employer committed to diversity goals (38.5 percent) and project owners with incentives or hiring goals for women (37.9 percent).

Survey respondents highlight the significant benefits of working in the trades, yet their responses also make clear that the industry needs to change if it wants to retain and grow the number of women it employs and create a thriving and more diverse workforce. Efforts focused on creating inclusive, harassment-free workplaces, mentorship and community supports, more outreach to women, and family-friendly policies to support all workers can help the industry build a sustainable workforce for the future.

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