Many can remember when police officers, mail carriers, and doctors were almost exclusively men. Today, female workers in these fields are commonplace, thanks to the work and determination of early pioneers. But despite significant gains in many careers once thought to be the exclusive province of men, occupational segregation by gender is persistent. The underrepresentation of women continues to be particularly stark in the construction industry, where women represent less than 3 percent of the skilled trades’ workforce.

Occupational segregation is a significant contributor to the stagnant gender wage gap. Women’s wages remain an average of 20 percent lower than those earned by men; for women of color the gap is 30 percent to 40 percent. The full impact of the disparity can be seen when you view earnings over the lifetime for workers in female- or male-dominated careers. As the chart on page 3 demonstrates, electricians can earn $1.5 million more over a lifetime than certified nursing assistants.

Wages are not only significantly higher, but women working in the skilled construction trades also have better-than-average benefits, and instead of paying tuition, they learn while they earn in paid classroom and on-the-job training. Beyond economic benefits, tradeswomen find job satisfaction and take pride in the permanence and beauty of their work.

In 1978, affirmative action and equal employment opportunity regulations opened the doors to women in the construction trades and to high-wage, high-skill careers. Shortly thereafter, a number of tradeswomen groups started forming across the country to offer peer support and combat the persistent challenges of fully breaking into and succeeding in the industry. Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT), founded in 1981, grew out of informal networks to break through the construction industry’s concrete floor.
potluck dinners, where tradeswomen found sisterhood, mentoring, and support. The fledgling group soon turned to activism to protect the federal affirmative action regulations and to advocacy, including legal actions to address ongoing discrimination and disparate treatment on the job and in the apprenticeship classroom. Even with successful litigation, institutional changes were slow to manifest themselves. So CWIT expanded its activities to fill the gap, offering pre-apprenticeship training and technical assistance to the industry’s contractors, unions, and apprenticeship programs.

Despite the robust efforts of tradeswomen, the CWIT, and the small number of other tradeswomen groups, women continue to struggle to enter the skilled trades. They still face isolation on the job site, routine encounters with sexual harassment, and inequities in hiring, training, and job retention.

The complexity of addressing this issue, which is deeply rooted in societal stereotypes about women’s abilities and preferences, institutionalized discriminatory policy and practices, and implicit bias, means there is no simple solution. Change at various levels is required for women to pursue these careers and to be treated equitably in them. Action can start with ensuring that the career education and workforce development system, which continue to funnel female jobseekers into traditional female, often low-wage, occupations, adopt equitable practices including expanding outreach to women and offering programs to help women prepare to be competitive candidates. Apprenticeship programs and employers need to review entry and selection criteria, which, along with unconscious and implicit biases, often have a disparate impact on women.

Tradeswomen love their jobs, but most will tell you that they are challenged to build successful long-term careers as a result of persistent discrimination and exhausting micro-inequities. The industry must implement policy and practices to address the subtle and overt discrimination that affects hiring, layoffs, on-the job training, and job assignments. Just as important to women's retention in the trades are solutions for inequitable working conditions that range from harassment, a lack of gender-appropriate health and safety measures, and limited accommodation for pregnancy and family leave.

The stories discussed in this article demonstrate how tradeswomen’s leadership, peer networks, and activism are changing the construction sector. But for real transformation to occur, these efforts must be supported, amplified, and institutionalized by industry leaders who are essential to making these practices the sector standard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nurse Assistant</th>
<th>Supervisor</th>
<th>Apprentice Electrician</th>
<th>Journey-level Electrician</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$ per hour</td>
<td>10.29</td>
<td>16,00</td>
<td>18-21.00</td>
<td>43.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ per year</td>
<td>$20,581</td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>86,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ in 30 yrs</td>
<td>$617,430</td>
<td>900,000</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2,580,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Nothing compares to building things, actually being a carpenter. Nothing else can even come close. It’s a lot of hard work, but what you do, you can see when you walk away at the end of the day.” – Kina McAfee, carpenter
Women’s committees

Women’s committees and mentorship programs, both formal and informal, are important in building women’s success in apprenticeship and advancement in the union and on the job. The International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) District Council 14 Women’s Committee on Organizing (WC) was founded in Chicago in 2015 by women members of IUPAT with support from the union leaders and CWIT. The mission of the WC is “educating, inspiring, providing mutual support, building a sense of belonging, and promoting active participation of our women members and leading them through charitable works, political involvement, and various pursuits that promote and strengthen our locals and the labor movement.” The committee is especially focused on increasing the number of female apprentices.

But qualifying to enter the painters’ apprenticeship program is complicated by the requirement to obtain an intent-to-hire letter from a contractor, significantly limiting women’s participation. A priority for the committee has been to bridge this gap by mentoring applicants and introducing them to business agents and potential sponsors. In 2018, the committee began partnering with the contractors’ association to host contractor open houses at CWIT, bringing contractors along with apprenticeship program and union leadership together with CWIT graduates, painting apprentices, and journey-level workers seeking sponsorship and job opportunities.

The WC also encourages and prepares its members to be as active in their local unions and to run for officer positions. Five WC members have recently been elected to officer positions in their locals; the apprenticeship school has hired its first female instructor; and the district council has hired its first female business agent.

Up until five years ago, women in the Chicago Plumbers Local Union 130 represented less than 1 percent of the membership. The union and apprenticeship program leaders were not welcoming to women, gaining entrance was daunting, and, without consistent employment opportunities and support from the union, attracting and retaining women in the program was exceedingly difficult. Finally, a change in leadership in the local and in the apprenticeship program initiated a rapid change in the prospects for women. The application process became legitimately open and fair, resulting in the top candidates’ getting spots in the program, regardless of gender or race, and, with the change, the number of women entering the program began to increase. This increase galvanized journey-women who joined forces to ensure that none of these new apprentices fell through the cracks. They created a rough plan, deciding to take a grassroots/DIY approach to offering mentorship, community, and support for retention.

Their model includes tutoring whenever any sister asks and monthly meet-ups that consist of a hands-on project to address questions that have come up. They attend their union meetings as a group, thereby encouraging participation, solidarity, and visibility. The leaders make calls monthly to each apprentice (sometimes more if there’s a situation going on) to check on how work, school, transportation, and home life are going. They regularly volunteer together and maintain a private Facebook group to check in, post union events, post pictures of
victories and failures, ask questions, share opportunities, and maintain community. This group approach gives every female apprentice multiple contacts to reach out to, provides examples of the many different paths to success, and actively works to inspire new leaders to carry on the work and perpetuate the model.

They also have become a “recruitment machine” — increasing the number of apprentices by 1,000 percent in the last five years, while also increasing retention of apprentices from 50 percent to 90 percent. As a result of their collective visibility and actions, they are earning the respect of the union and industry leadership and finding that women are being treated more equitably and are being given more opportunity, including, for the first time in the union’s history, the chance to represent the local at the Union Apprenticeship Convention.

Representation and female leaders are critical to further increasing women’s participation and success. Sheet Metal Workers Local #28 Apprenticeship Program has seen dramatic improvements in women’s participation in apprenticeship, increasing the overall percentage from 3 percent at the beginning of 2011 to 11 percent in 2017, and achieving a rate of 16 percent for new apprentices entering the program in 2017. This transformation is being led by Leah Rambo, a veteran sheet metal worker and the program’s first female apprenticeship director. She put into place five core strategies: goal setting (with consistent monitoring and evaluation); sustained outreach; cooperation with feeder programs; emphasis on equity in hiring and OJT to the contractors; and visible, active support for female apprentices.

Rambo also emphasizes monitoring apprentices’ performance and progress to ensure women are getting good training and being treated fairly. Rambo is firm about ensuring she has good objective data to prevent bias from creeping in. A sole woman working among men is typically being observed much more closely than her male colleagues are; anything she does (wrong) will get noticed immediately, while equally wrong or worse behavior from male apprentices may go unnoticed.

Women apprentices may face a more hostile environment at work than male apprentices, and even in the best of cases, being the only woman can be tough. For this reason, all female apprentices receive an introduction to the realities of working in a male-dominated field, including information on how to respond to discrimination and whom to contact if they experience discrimination or harassment on the job. Local 28 also has launched a women’s committee to offer peer support.

Making work work for women: #MeToo and more

In the construction workplace the “locker room environment” or macho culture is the unquestioned standard of behavior and communication, where sexualized conversations, jokes, stories, graffiti, and pornography are commonplace. There is enormous pressure on tradeswomen to fit in and join in — to be “one of the guys,” and women entering these fields don’t want to be seen as whiners or complainers while striving for acceptance and inclusion.
Working as the only female on a job site, being ostracized by co-workers, or facing harassment can add a layer of stress and distraction to an already dangerous job. Tradeswomen have faced threats of physical harm, been placed in dangerous situations by male co-workers and supervisors, and had their work sabotaged. In a hostile workplace, supervisors or co-workers may withhold training, assistance, and safety information or equipment. Tradeswomen report they often feel that they cannot ask for help because that would create the scenario of “See, I told you she couldn’t do it.”

It is especially hard for women to challenge workplace culture on an individual basis. To speak up or to complain is fraught with all the stigma of being female in a male-identified job, and women who enter these fields may feel that they have no choice but to adapt to the locker-room environment so as not to be labeled a “troublemaker.”

The International Ironworkers Union has taken the lead nationally to address retention of women in the field. The Ironworkers launched the “Be That One Guy” campaign designed to challenge sexism and to address and curtail workplace bullying, hazing, sexual harassment, and discrimination in order to remove these barriers to advancement. The campaign includes implementing dedicated town hall meetings designed to break the silence and provide an open forum for frank discussion so that employers and employees can realize the gravity and urgency of the issue. They are also building a curriculum for diversity and equity for their membership as well as conducting bystander training that emphasizes harassment as a safety issue and incorporates it into mandatory safety training.

The Ironworkers Union general organizer Vicki O’Leary, a veteran ironworker and the first female general organizer for the union, provides guidance and support for female ironworkers across the country as well as to their local unions, employers, and apprenticeship programs to create harassment-free worksites and unions. Led by O’Leary, and instigated by tradeswomen sharing their stories, the ironworkers have become the first building trades union to offer paid pregnancy and maternity leave. The policy is a landmark moment for women seeking equity in traditionally male jobs.

These examples of groundbreaking work taking place in apprenticeship programs, unions, and job sites across the country offer encouragement that women will make the same inroads into construction careers that we have seen in other formerly male-dominated occupations. To accelerate that progress, CWIT established the National Center for Women’s Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment in 2015 to guide a nationwide initiative to add a gender lens to the apprenticeship system and its industry partners. The center brings together a consortium of tradeswomen organizations to provide technical assistance, conduct trainings, and take promising practices to scale with the industry’s contractors, unions, and apprenticeship programs. To learn more, visit their website, www.womensequitycenter.org.

Lauren Sugerman is the director of the National Center for Women’s Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment at Chicago Women in Trades. The organization offers resources to increase the number of women entering and being retained in male-dominated jobs and apprenticeships in the construction, manufacturing, and transportation sectors.