

WILL YOUR ORGANIZATION LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD OR CONTRIBUTE TO OCCUPATIONAL GENDER SEGREGATION?

By Larry Robbin

Executive Director of Robbin and Associates

Workforce development organizations have some important decisions to make about whether or not they will use their green jobs or infrastructure rebuilding funds in ways that create occupational equality or inadvertently perpetrate discrimination and exclusion. Here are some of the most common jobs that will be involved in these initiatives: electrician (1%), carpenter (1.5%), construction equipment operator (1.5%), brick masons (.4%), plumbers and pipe fitters (1.4%), construction laborers (3.1%), structural iron and steel workers (.9%).

The percentages come from the Department of Labor and they represent the number of women in these trades! It is a good thing that much has been said in the workforce field about making sure these jobs are available to men of color, people in poverty, people in reentry, youth, people with disabilities and other under represented populations, but very little has been written about the lack of women in general and women of color in particular in these careers. While men of color have yet to achieve parity their numbers are significantly higher than the percentages of women in these trades. The Department of Labor defines a job as non-traditional for one gender when they are represented by less than twenty-five percent of the people working in that job. The number of hours in the skilled trades in construction currently performed by women is two percent of the total hours worked and the number hasn't changed in over thirty years. Why aren't more women in these jobs?

At ages five or six children playing work on the playground are already tracked into occupational gender roles. The boy is the truck driver and the girl is the child care worker. Children are rarely exposed to women doing non-traditional employment so they grow up not thinking of it as an option for them. In the teen age years the desire to fit in with the norms of a group of peers is a very powerful force. Most teenage women that talk about wanting to do non-traditional work face a great deal of negativity from their peers and families. Look at how few young women are in high school vocational technical education classes. There are so few women in the skilled trades that young women can grow up and in the course of their life time never see a woman in highway construction, installing solar panels, putting down concrete, operating a bull dozer or building a house. As a result the tracking process is

complete and most women do not pursue these better jobs but settle for jobs "where they fit." There is also a tracking process for men that keeps them out of child care, secretary jobs and data entry which are all jobs that fit the non-traditional twenty-five percent gender representation threshold definition. But the important difference is women are much more often being excluded from high paying jobs with career paths, insurance, retirement and other benefits while men are more frequently being excluded from low paying jobs with few perks.

There are many more reasons why women are so underrepresented in the skilled trades. Almost no career counselors or workforce development staff are trained in the recruitment and counseling of women for non-traditional careers. The federal Workforce Investment Act funds one-stops which can be found in every county in the United States. One-stops provide a wide range of employment services and refer people to training. They are one of the largest employment related systems in the country. Wider Opportunities for Women notes that in the last program year for which data is available the entire system placed than two percent of men or women in non-traditional occupations! Job Corps another large national system of workforce training services has historically not been able to achieve its recruitment goals for young women. In response to not meeting this goal many centers increased their efforts to recruit women for their food service and office occupational training as opposed to embarking a major non-traditional skilled trades initiative which would have taken these women farther out of poverty faster than these other tracks. Focusing on these skilled blue collar jobs also would have given these women the opportunity to start their own businesses. You will also find that books and Internet sites about careers almost never talk about or show women doing skilled blue collar work. When you add up all these facts it's no wonder women are so poorly represented in these high paying jobs.

There are other forces of occupational discrimination at work as well. While some businesses and unions are exemplary role models for non-traditional employment in the skilled trades too many resist this change just like they resisted breaking the color line. The job retention of women that enter the trades is poor because of sexual and other forms of harassment, exclusion, threats, discriminatory lack of training and real accidents caused by resistance to their presence. While the world of working tradeswomen is filled with stories of role model male co-workers, bosses and union representatives that accepted and helped them, it is also filled with many more stories of men in management, labor and the workforce

that tried to drive them out of the trades. This is especially true for tradeswomen of color that face the double barrier of racism and sexism. Women that are not heterosexual also face intense opposition to their presence. The experience of tradeswomen is similar to the stories told by men of color that broke the color line in the skilled trades. They talk about the few co-workers, bosses and unions that accepted them and the many many more that tried covertly or overtly to get rid of them. Being on the front lines of social change in very dangerous and challenging jobs isn't easy.

It wasn't always like this. During the second world war when men were in the military women were recruited in huge numbers to jobs in the skilled trades. Factories had on-site daycare and used other means to accommodate them. Posters and propaganda recruited them with slogans like "a woman's role is in the factory." Women built the tanks, aircraft and ships that won the war. But after the war when the men came home most of these Rosie the Riveters were quickly forced out of their jobs and the propaganda machine said "a woman's place is in the home." Many of them were literally harassed and shamed out of their jobs! Interesting how political will driven by war time necessity overcame several hundred years of history about what jobs were for men and what jobs were for women, but then relapsed quickly into old patterns when the war ended.

One of the goals of workforce organizations should be to avoid perpetuating occupational discrimination. The field must seriously direct its green and infrastructure initiatives in ways that help women pursue non-traditional employment. When I talk about this with green and infrastructure program managers they will sometimes say, "Oh we have some women in our training program" as if to say they have solved the problem of unequal representation. This is not enough. Women make up more than half of the labor force, but they are segregated into the lowest paying jobs, without benefits and little job security. This is especially true for women of color.

Women in skilled trades training programs typically come into the programs under their own motivation and rarely as a result of a targeted non-traditional recruitment strategy. Only a very small percentage of these programs have well thought out non-traditional recruitment, support and retention plans. The vast majority of programs aren't teaching sexual harassment awareness and gender diversity to their program participants and staff. They don't track drop out rates of women or placement outcomes such as wages and retention in

comparison to men. If programs have a strong commitment to equality they will do all of these things and more to ensure they are at the forefront of leveling occupational playing field. Track your success with women at every level including recruitment, training retention, hiring, wages, advancement and job retention so you can be objective about how well you are doing.

Other managers will say they tried to recruit women, but weren't successful. Chances are they did not put a lot of time and effort into talking with women in trades. They also didn't find out how progressive businesses, unions, schools and training providers recruited women. They didn't exposing potential recruits to non-traditional women as role models. Without doing these things typical recruitment methods will not work when you are trying to help people become pioneers. They need a more powerful recruitment effort that will help them leap over the powerful internal and external forces of gender job title tracking. Simply put if programs don't do these things in recruitment, retention and hiring they are perpetuating gender discrimination whether they want to admit it or not. Employment programs should try to increase the number of women, men of color and other underrepresented groups in these jobs. This task is not impossible and there are some progressive workforce organizations, training providers, unions, schools, apprenticeship programs and businesses that are already doing this important work very successfully.

How do you get started? Google non-traditional employment for women and learn about the issues and successful programs. Study any local apprenticeship programs, high school and college shop and trades classes and blue collar trades employment training programs that have been successful in attracting women. Talk with unions, employers and women's organizations and tradeswomen. Make sure you talk with women in all kinds of trades because the trades are very diverse and have different advantages and disadvantages for women. Find out how and why these pioneers went into non-traditional employment and what keeps them there. Ask their advice about how to recruit, train and retain women in non-traditional occupations. See if your regional office of the Department of Labor and the DOL Women's Bureau can be of help. Train your managers, employees and trainees in workforce diversity issues so you retain tradeswomen and other under represented populations. One of the most important program components you can develop will be a mentoring program with women that are experienced in the trades as the mentors to the women in your training

program and your graduates. Nothing beats this kind of support to help people that are pioneering. If you want to learn more about women in the trades send an email to my wife Sue Doro at tradesis@aol.com and ask to be put on the subscription list for her free email newsletter *Pride and Paycheck*. It's filled with useful information and resources. You can put in a flyer about your program and use it as a recruitment tool. Sue was a machinist for thirteen years and is a leader in the non-traditional jobs movement. Use all these resources to form an advisory group to help guide your program's work in non-traditional employment.

How will you know if you are successful at leveling the gender playing field? One benchmark to look at is your program's ability to have more than twenty-five percent of your program participants be women. Then you will be just barely crossing the line of the DOL definition of non-traditional occupations. A better goal is to have women represented by half of your program participants since women make up more than half of the labor force in general. There are many other ways to measure success. You can conduct anonymous participant program satisfaction surveys and/or have an outside party conduct focus groups of women in the program. The results of the surveys and groups can be compiled by a third party that is not part of your staff or management. This will help you get the most objective input since some women may be reluctant to talk about their experience in your program without the guarantee of confidentiality. But you also need to look at hard data. Are women retained and placed at the same levels as men in your program? Are their wages, retention and advancement on the job after graduating your program equal to men? You may also want to apply this level of scrutiny to the outcomes of men of color and other under represented populations to make sure your program is not replicating the bias that exists in the workplace. Keep in mind wage parity for women will not be an easy goal to achieve since women in general earn eighty cents for every dollar earned by a man in the same occupation. But if your goal is economic equality you will look at both the results obtained in your program and beyond.

Do your part to make the percentages listed at the beginning of this article history and replace them with such high and equitable numbers of skilled tradeswomen that these jobs are no longer considered non-traditional. You will feel the pride of leveling the playing field, eliminating occupational gender discrimination, taking people and families out of poverty and creating role models for young women. You will also be educating men and boys about what women can do and how to welcome them into areas where society has yet to achieve

equality. You will be helping to build the diverse workforce of the future and not replicate the workforce segregation of the past. What a great way to extend the progressive values behind the green jobs and infrastructure initiatives to changing who is being trained and hired to do this important work!

Larry Robbin has been a consultant, trainer, evaluator, program developer and keynote speaker in the workforce development field for over forty-five years. He provides a wide range of on-site and telephone training and management consulting services to workforce organizations across the country including services related to improving non-traditional training and job opportunities for under represented populations. For further information on his services contact larryrobbin@aol.com or 510-834-8524.

Feel free to reprint this article with credit given to the author. Please send reprints to larryrobbin@aol.com.