

Empowering Women in the Building Trades

BY ERICKA WILLS

NEARLY 100 WOMEN WHO WORK IN CONSTRUCTION GATHERED in Madison, Wisc., on March 9, 2024, to learn, connect, and socialize at empowHER Wisconsin's first annual Women Build Wisconsin event. Established in 2019 to create positive change for women in Wisconsin's construction industry, empowHER not only endured the pandemic as a young organization but also increased the size of its membership and launched programs to support its goal of normalizing the role and presence of women in construction. Today empowHER has a network of over 500 individuals representing all the building trades in Wisconsin.

The Women Build Wisconsin event intentionally brought together women from urban and rural communities across the state to foster community and support. Michele Williams, an International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) journeyman electrician and member of empowHER leadership, explained:

As women in construction, we know that it isn't always one incident that can make a woman leave the industry. Sometimes, it is more like a steady erosion that creates a canyon. That wearing down over time contributes to women leaving the building trades.

Williams elaborated that the bonds developed at events like Women Build Wisconsin can help female construction workers stay in the industry, particularly "during challenging days, especially when they may be the only woman on a job site."

empowHER's leaders and members recognize that increasing women's participation in the building trades—especially at a time when the Biden administration's Investing in America agenda promises more construction career opportunities to women and diverse populations through hiring incentives and requirements—cannot be achieved solely through top-down diversity initiatives tied to legislation. Instead, grassroots organizations like empowHER are essential for providing on-the-worksites support and issue-focused programs that meet women workers' needs.

Women in Construction: Participation, Challenges, Trends, and Advantages

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, women accounted for 46.8% of the labor force in 2022, yet they made up only 11% of workers in the construction trades in 2021. Even worse, the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) found that tradeswomen are only 3.9% of those who "work with tools" in construction.

Increasing recruitment and retention of women in the building trades requires a conscious effort to address the challenges under-represented groups face in the construction sector. To this end, in 2022, North America's Building Trades Unions (NABTU) commissioned the Institute for Construction Employment Research (ICER) to bring together scholars from leading U.S. research universities to conduct a study on female and minority participation in the construction industry and identify areas for future growth.

ICER's report, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives in the Construction Trades," found that while people of color and women are "[d]rawn to the trades for various reasons," they "are still not always welcomed." >>



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The author (third from right) with participants in the Women Build Wisconsin mentoring session, Madison, Wisc., March 9, 2024.

Credit: Willow Ummel.

ICER noted multiple challenges these groups can face, including: isolated and hostile job sites, workplace sexual harassment or assault, unequal work assignments, and a lack of access to overtime when a policy does not exist in a collective bargaining agreement.

Many women who work in the building trades recognize these challenges and the need to address them so that more women can share in the advantages of these careers. “Working in the trades can be difficult, particularly for women of color,” explains the National Center for Women’s Equality in Apprenticeship and Employment. However, what “makes women persist is that the trades offer benefits that they do not find in other careers.”

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Specifically, construction trades—particularly unionized jobs—provide opportunities for earning a paycheck while receiving apprenticeship training in skilled careers that offer family-sustaining wages and benefits.

Registered apprenticeships, such as those offered through building trades unions, are industry-vetted and U.S. Department of Labor-approved programs in which participants earn pay increases as they receive structured, on-the-job career training. According to the Department of Labor, 90% of people who complete a registered apprenticeship retained employment in the sector at an average salary of \$80,000 in 2023.

Despite the financial benefits of such programs, while women represent about half of the labor force, they accounted for only around 80,000 of the 600,000 individuals in U.S. apprenticeship programs in 2022, a little over 13%. However, the construction industry is also seeing some promising trends regarding tradeswomen. The number of women in building trades apprenticeships doubled between 2014 and 2022, and growth in the number of women apprentices outpaced that of male apprentices between 2016 and

2019, even as their overall numbers remained low compared to men.

As more women enter the building trades, they have access not only to career training, financial security, and employment benefits but also to what the National Center for Women’s Equality in Apprenticeship and Employment describes as “intangible benefits like setting an example for their children and the pride and joy of doing their jobs well.”

Williams, who spoke about empowHER’s Women Build Wisconsin event, describes the tangible and intangible benefits she has received from a career in the building trades in this way:

Women who get into the trades are often strong-minded problem solvers. We see women who never felt settled until they entered the building trades because more stereotypical ‘women’s work’ never satisfied their needs as a whole person. Construction jobs let you be financially independent, often working independently and independently developing your sense of self. It is the most delicious combination of mental and physical exhaustion at the end of the day that makes me feel more whole!

Tradeswomen like Williams, her empowHER sisters, and members of similar local organizations connected through NABTU’s national Trades Women Build Nations (TWBN) program are committed to ensuring more women can enjoy the benefits of building trades careers.

Recruiting and Retaining Women in the Building Trades

Four key pieces of legislation are at the heart of what the Biden administration is branding its Investing in America agenda: the American Rescue Plan, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law), the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act. These pieces of legislation contain important provisions like prevailing wage requirements, union construction incentives, and initiatives aimed at expanding the participation of underrepresented communities in apprenticeship programs and the unionized construction workforce. All these policies can potentially promote women’s involvement in the construction industry. Nonetheless, the day-to-day procedures that facilitate the effective recruitment and retention of women in the building trades—from apprenticeship readiness to career

longevity—depend on on-the-ground organizations such as empowHER.

As part of their mission to normalize the role of women in construction, empowHER members can often be found doing outreach at apprenticeship readiness programs, job fairs, and career exploration events, such as those offered by the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) BIG STEP, whose goal, according to the organization's website, is to make sure "everyone has a pathway to a family-supporting career." On the worksite, empowHER members with more experience in the building trades are reaching out to women who are new to the industry to provide support and share information about empowHER's two pilot programs, which are currently in their first year: childcare and mentoring. These programs were recently launched because while empowHER has grown over the last five years, new funding opportunities have also expanded through state, federal, and private funds to support grassroots solutions for increasing women's participation in the building trades.

empowHER and the Milwaukee Building and Construction Trades Council are working with NABTU and Trades Futures on a pilot project to improve childcare access and affordability for workers in the construction industry. While this program is open to both men and women in the building trades, abundant studies demonstrate childcare responsibilities are disproportionately borne by women workers and exacerbate the gender pay gap. Therefore, to recruit and retain women in the industry, empowHER's pilot childcare program has been designed to address unique challenges in finding childcare when working in the building trades, including: 1) early and late work hours that necessitate non-standard hours of childcare; 2) a cyclical industry that does not provide year-round employment for all workers so childcare can be needed intermittently; 3) workers who receive short-notice work calls and need a quality "drop-in" childcare option; and 4) apprentices who earn less on the pay scale which results in a more significant cost burden for workers early in their training and career. empowHER's childcare program is designed to address these factors to make it possible for women with children to enter and stay in the workforce.

Pam Fendt, president of the Milwaukee Area Labor Council and member of empowHER leadership, stated:


Initially, the pilot program used a centrally located childcare facility near major downtown worksites in Milwaukee. However, we found that once families have found a childcare arrangement they like, they don't want to change it, even for financial assistance. So, we adjusted the program model to act essentially as a voucher, aiding the entrance of new women and retaining existing women into the construction industry.

In addition to the childcare pilot program, empowHER has also launched a pilot mentoring program. Christina Breitlow, a union journeyman plumber and current vice president of empowHER, described how she felt lucky to have good mentors through her unions but wants the program to "take the luck out of finding a mentor."

The empowHER mentoring program is unique because it is built from the ground up, based on the needs expressed by women in the building trades, and designed to provide the content and structure that women have requested.

When the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development reached out to empowHER about a grant to support their retention goals, Kilah Engelke, a union cement mason, concrete finisher, and empowHER leadership team member, recalls that empowHER recognized it as an ideal opportunity to launch a pilot mentoring program:

One of our values is that we want to be positive and solution-minded. By initiating a culture change for women to have a mentoring support network to address workplace issues, we are working towards a future where our construction job sites will look like our communities—made up of 50% women.

Currently, the mentoring program is a one-year pilot program with a formalized mentoring curriculum. Women with at least five years of experience are paired with those who are new to the industry or need extra support. This helps retain women workers who learn how to prepare for the challenges of construction work, address problems such as workplace harassment and discrimination, and develop a support network so that women know they are never alone, even when they may be the only woman on a job site. 

ERICKA WILLS is an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin School for Workers.

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