

How a #METOO Moment Can Become a Movement for Culture Change:

Tradeswomen and Sexual Harassment

Comments by Lauren Sugerman, Chicago Women in Trades

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Like so many of us, here today and around the world, the #metoo movement has resonated deeply with me, on a personal level because of my experiences while working as an elevator constructor. And on a professional level because, even though I left a job I loved due to the isolation and hostile work environment, I've spent my entire career encouraging women to work in male-dominated jobs in construction, manufacturing and transportation – in the same conditions that were so undermining to me.

Tradeswomen have been fighting discrimination and dealing with sexual harassment since the doors to these still male-dominated jobs opened up as a result of affirmative action in the early 80's. Women working in construction experience the highest rates of sexual harassment second only to female miners. So, fully knowing that, I have still urged women to pursue these careers. And I constantly reckon with that.

However, I also know that these jobs offer women something invaluable –high wages, good benefits, on-the job training that is the equivalent of a four year college degree without the debt. These jobs aren't just critical to ending the gender wage gap and providing women economic security but they also bring a unique kind of empowerment that comes with work that allows you to point to a high-rise, a bridge, a road, and say: I built that!

Nevertheless, the high reward often comes at a high cost. When women are still less than 3% of the construction workforce they often work two jobs at once: the first -working long hard days laying brick, stacking elevator rails, building skyscrapers and the second -simultaneously as pioneers who spend just as much energy on breaking through the glass ceiling (concrete floor). What that means is spending eight to 12 hours a day in the "locker room", often the only woman on a jobsite, facing harassment due to sex, race, sexual orientation, discrimination in hiring and training, gender related health and safety challenges, and a multitude of micro-inequities that are too small to name. These all still intersect to keep women from succeeding and lasting in nontraditional careers. And often, because we work in physically demanding and dangerous jobs, harassment, lack of training or poorly fitting safety equipment can combine to make discrimination not just work jeopardizing, but sometimes life threatening.

To challenge all of this on an individual basis is risky: to speak up, to complain, and to call attention is fraught with all the stigma or stereotypes of being female in a male identified job. If you cannot take the heat get out of the fire, you are just too sensitive, we should not have to change the way we work just because a woman is here. So, for our sanity, our future, other women's opportunities we have looked to a tried and true method of survival and fighting back. We organized and gave birth to Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT).

Chicago Women in Trades was first and foremost a place to see ourselves and our experiences reflected in each other. To affirm that we weren't crazy, or weak, or incompetent, or too sensitive. That we belonged – if not yet on the job – at least to each other.

Second, we shared and developed strategies on how to cope. But we wanted more and so third, we began to strategize on how to fight back – collectively – so we didn't individually have to suffer consequences. Fourth, we learned, that we could do more than complain, we could also identify and offer solutions. Our herstory is going from potlucks, to protests and picket lines, to developing policy and programs. In between there was some litigation, a lot of fundraising and always, sisterhood, support and solidarity.

It hasn't meant that sexual harassment or discrimination – subtle and overt- has gone away, but we have survived, more women are entering and being accepted in the trades and although we have a long way to go, now we (hope) are seeing a tidal shift. In many cases tradeswomen individually - and the organizations that have sustained and protected us -have earned the respect of our co-workers, union leaders. As a result of our organizing we have federal funding for our work, new federal regulations in the apprenticeship system that explicitly expand provisions for sexual harassment prevention, women's committees like the Sisters in the Brotherhood in the carpenters union, women being elected as union leaders, hired as teachers, as job site crew leaders. We are especially pumped by the extraordinary step the International Ironworkers Union has taken to build a culture that supports women and families. Last year they implemented a paid pregnancy accommodation and maternity leave policy that rivals those of most high tech companies and far outshines our public policies. CWIT and our sister organization's across the country are feeling in demand today: to conduct training for sexual harassment prevention across the country, to set up mentorship programs, to change policy on the jobsite in our unions and in apprenticeship programs.

I think the lessons we've learned along the way are important so this *#metoo* moment doesn't become just a watershed moment gracing the cover of Time magazine. A moment has to become a movement so this awareness, anger, and momentum, do not evaporate, but instead fuel the effort to create real culture change. *#Metoo* has taken the first step: naming, voicing and sharing our common experiences. It has let the world know that sexual harassment is no trivial matter. Now we need to go out and create the response – and it is not trivial either. The response has to be more than perpetrators being shamed, losing their jobs and public respect - though that is a good start. It is defining solutions that involve training, policy that lays out investigation and discipline practices, transformative strategies to create equitable and inclusive workplaces that ensure that all workers and especially the most vulnerable workers have jobs that are safe, harassment free and provide dignity. It is building solidarity with our allies so they can join in, speak up, and intervene.

I am excited to be part of that movement and I hope that tradeswomen's examples of organizing, advocating and supporting one another can help light the way for all women.

For more information on training resources on preventing and responding to sexual harassment and how to create equitable and inclusive workplaces for women in male-dominated fields please see: CWIT website: <http://womensequitycenter.org/apprenticeship-programs/training-and-retention/>
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