



STUDY ON HEALTH AND SAFETY FOR WOMEN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

Summary of Findings

This fact sheet presents findings from the Safety and Health Empowerment for Women in Trades (SHEWT) study, a collaboration between the University of Washington and Washington Women in Trades. The study used focus groups and surveys with women and men working in the trades in Washington State to better understand the health and safety risks affecting tradeswomen at work. Below are the top risks identified by 25 focus group participants and key survey results.

Common Themes Raised in Focus Groups

Health & Injury Risks

Dangerous work environment
 Inadequate bathrooms
 Chronic injuries

Social/Stress Risks

Coworker acceptance of risk
 Hazing
 Job insecurity
 Management prioritizing production over safety
 No paid sick leave
 Macho culture

Women-Specific Risks

Inadequate PPE
 Physical limitations
 Sexual harassment
 Gender discrimination and unequal training
 Overcompensation due to constantly proving self
 Tokenism
 Poor work/life balance
 Fear of layoff for reporting safety concerns
 Lack of support

What Workers Had to Say

“I think that just being a woman you have a lot of pressure to do things that are not the healthiest to keep up with the young 27-year-old guys.”

—*Journeywoman laborer*

“It’s always hard to break into a group. And there’s a certain amount of...hazing, just pulling tricks on the new person that happens.”

—*Journeyman carpenter*

“You just gotta be mindful about [electricity]. It doesn’t care what gender you are.”

—*Journeywoman electrician*

“It’s almost like you have to prove—as a woman—you have to prove yourself 10 fold before somebody will actually give you the respect.”

—*Journeywoman laborer*

“I think I’ve had guys purposely tell me something that wasn’t true, which could have jeopardized my safety. So I guess, sabotage is sometimes a threat...It falls back into the hostile work environment of the guys who don’t want you there. And therefore they’ll set you up to fail.”

—*Journeywoman electrician*

“And if you ask for that [handwashing station], which you’re also entitled to, you’re on that layoff next week too.”

—*Journeywoman electrician*

“I think the trades is a white man’s industry. And so there’s a comfort level with white men to be with white men and to put white men under their wings. And so I think women and people of color and other minorities are at a disadvantage.”

—*Retired electrician*

Survey Results

- Almost 300 workers completed surveys about health and safety hazards in the workplace
- Demographics: 68% women, 32% men; 43% apprentice, 57% journey level. The top trades represented were: laborers, electricians, pipe trades, and carpenters
- Women reported higher levels of perceived stress compared to men
- More than half of women reported pushing themselves past their physical comfort at least half of the time to get the job done
- Almost half of women felt discriminated against at work due to their gender
- Women were more likely than men to report at least one injury at work in the past year
- Of those respondents who were injured in the past year, women were more likely than men to not report their injury due to fear of layoff
- Women were more likely than men to report PPE not fitting properly. Of women who did not feel comfortable asking for better PPE, more than half listed “fear of being labeled complainer by coworkers” or “fear of layoff” as the primary reason

▶ **Compared to men, women in our survey reported a higher risk of injury at work in the past year and high levels of stress.**

- Data supports the idea that apprentices experience higher levels of stress than those who have finished their apprenticeship
- For women, overcompensation and gender discrimination were associated with being injured at work in the past year
- For women, reporting high stress was associated with age discrimination, poor work/life balance, and financial hardship
- Women who received high levels of support from their coworkers and supervisor showed a lower risk of stress

Survey Short Answer Themes

Top Problems for Women

Sexist stereotypes
Physical limitations
Discrimination
Harassment
Under-representation
Having to prove selves
No respect
Poor work/life balance
Poor training
Inadequate PPE/tools
Women who set bad example

Solutions

More women
Education
Improved training
Treat women and men equal
Don't know
Mentoring
Women carry selves

Other Experiences

Variability in jobsites
Women feel accepted
Job insecurity
Inadequate supervision
Love work

“I have been doing this a long time. It has gotten better but so much of the stress is covert, hard to pin down. The harassment never really stops; you learn to ignore it. They will take the first opportunity available to replace you. Men don't want us there so it is a constant, unstated hostile environment.”

—Journeywoman electrician

“Point blank, we are not as strong as men. I have to work twice as hard as a man to do the same job. It is not their fault, and I don't let it hold me back.”

—Journeywoman laborer

I believe the biggest problem we face is still just proving that we can perform the work as well as other men. I feel I should just be able to walk onto a jobsite and have the confidence of my male coworkers and supervisors, but I have not had that experience in this job.”

—Journeywoman laborer

“We need to continue to educate both sexes in communication and not single out women as the weaker link... Everyone needs to be taught it's ok to say 'no this doesn't feel right or safe.'”

—Journeywoman electrician

“It would be ideal to have a mentoring program for women as an apprentice in the particular trade she is in to help understand the construction industry.”

—Journeywoman ironworker
