

Women in the Skilled Trades:

More Than Just Boots on the Ground



“ We set out to better understand what’s really happening for women working in the skilled trades - from how they get started, to what helps them stay, and what might push them out. ”

2025

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Executive Summary

Why This Matters

Despite a growing demand for skilled labor, women remain significantly underrepresented in the construction workforce. In 2022, women made up only 11% of the industry. Of those women, fewer than 4% worked in skilled craft roles.¹ As labor shortages intensify, attracting and retaining women in the trades is no longer just about diversity — it's a strategic imperative for companies seeking long-term growth and sustainability.

This white paper analyzes data from a 2024 survey conducted by NCCER and Ambition Theory. This Women in Construction survey and the follow-up interviews with female craft professionals were conducted to better understand the experiences of craftswomen in the construction industry, what motivates women to enter the trades, what barriers they face, and what keeps them or drives them away.

What We Found

- **Late entry into the trades:** Most women enter construction after dissatisfaction with other careers, and few are exposed to the trades early.
- **Bias still exists:** 80% of craftswomen surveyed reported having their expertise questioned or being mistaken for a junior employee, and informal networks (like “good-ole-boy” culture) still influence hiring and promotions.
- **Support systems are sparse:** Formal mentorship and sponsorship programs, along with appropriate PPE, are rare and not provided unless specifically requested. Only 1 in 15 respondents reported access to formal career advancement resources for women.
- **Retention is at risk:** Although most craftswomen in our survey said they enjoy their work, 40% were considering leaving their current employer within the next year, primarily due to limited advancement opportunities.
- **They want to grow:** 90% of respondents expressed a desire to advance into leadership, management, or training roles.

Key Recommendations

- Invest in early outreach and awareness campaigns that showcase construction and the trades as a viable career for young women.
- Build advancement pathways that are visible, achievable, and supported, and ensure they are not based on informal networks or guesswork.
- Create and implement formal mentorship programs tailored to support female craft professionals.
- Ensure facilities and PPE are available, inclusive, functional, and designed with women in mind.

Why Women in the Trades Matter

Construction companies across the U.S. are facing an unprecedented workforce challenge. Labor shortages are tightening, seasoned professionals are retiring, and too few young people, particularly women, are entering the skilled trades. At the same time, the construction industry is poised for growth and must support ongoing development within our industry and the country. In 2022, women made up only 11% of the construction workforce, despite making up nearly half of the overall labor force.¹ This disparity persists even as the industry faces labor shortages and implements initiatives to broaden the workforce.

With the U.S. construction industry poised for substantial growth, addressing systemic barriers that hinder women's participation and advancement in the skilled trades is essential. Finding and promoting avenues for integrating more craftswomen successfully into the construction industry is important, as it helps fill gaps within the industry and supports women in finding more rewarding positions. These positions can help women working in construction become more productive and fulfilled members of society.

This white paper draws on survey data and interviews with craftswomen working in the construction skilled

trades. The survey participants analyzed for this report were craftswomen who have chosen careers such as pipefitters, welders, electricians, carpenters, and more. The purpose of this study is to examine the career progression, workplace challenges, and motivational factors influencing craftswomen in skilled construction trades within a traditionally male-dominated industry. The analysis of both the survey data and the interviews aligns with Donald Super's Life-Space Career Theory as a theoretical perspective, which sees career development as a lifelong process shaped by roles, environments, and individual choices.

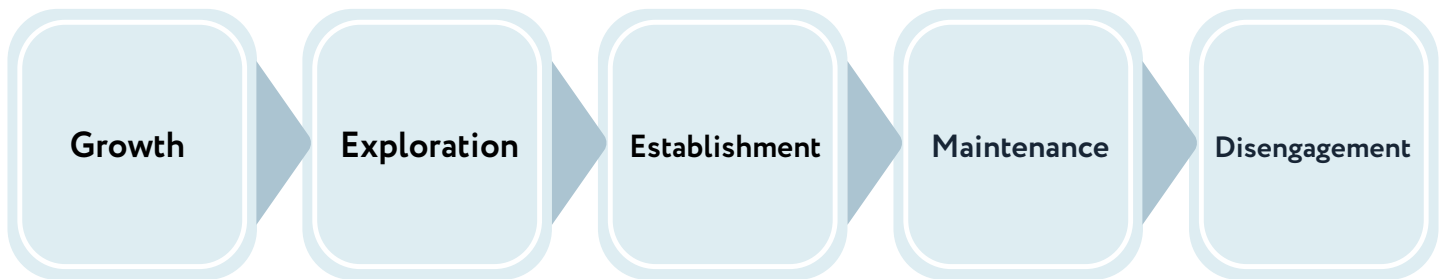
The survey data combined with a series of interviews allowed us to understand the experiences of these craftswomen more fully. The resulting analysis focused on:

- (a) Identifying the key barriers and facilitators that impact women's entry, advancement, and retention in skilled construction trades.
- (b) Understanding how mentorship, sponsorship, workplace culture, and career support mechanisms shape career trajectories for craftswomen in construction.
- (c) Determining the effectiveness of industry efforts, such as mentorship programs, support groups, and organizational sponsorship opportunities, in fostering an inclusive environment for women working in the skilled trades in construction.



What is Super's Life-Space Career Theory

Super's Life-Space Career Theory originates from the work of Donald E. Super, a prominent psychologist in vocational development. First introduced in the 1950s, Super's theory emphasizes that career development is a lifelong process influenced by various personal and contextual factors. Super proposed that individuals move through five distinct career stages: (a) growth, (b) exploration, (c) establishment, (d) maintenance, and (e) disengagement.



Donald Super's Life-Space, Life-Span Theory explains that career development, in this case applied for craftswomen in the construction industry, happens over a lifetime and is influenced by the different roles we play. As women craftworkers grow and change, their careers evolve too, reflecting their life stages and shifting priorities.

Each of these career stages is characterized by different challenges and actions that individuals take in response to those challenges. A central idea within Super's theory is that people play multiple roles throughout life, including worker, student, and family member, and that these different roles interact to shape their career decisions.²

Super's framework is particularly useful in understanding the career trajectories of craftswomen in the construction trades, where traditional gender norms have historically limited their access and opportunities for advancement. Craftswomen in

construction navigate their careers within a complex interplay of societal expectations, employer policies, and personal ambitions.³ They often experience distinct challenges and opportunities at each stage of career development, making Super's model an essential tool for understanding their professional journeys.

Due to the sample used throughout the research, this paper will focus only on the exploration, establishment, and maintenance stages of the theory and how those reflect and align with the challenges faced by women in the construction industry.

What We Set Out to Learn

We set out to better understand what's really happening for women working in the skilled trades - from how they get started, to what helps them stay, and what might push them out. To achieve this, we focused on two core questions:

What keeps women in the trades - and what drives them away? We wanted to identify the factors that contribute to long-term careers for women in skilled construction roles, and what common challenges cause them to leave.

What's getting in the way - and how does it affect career growth? From their first steps into the field to opportunities for advancement, we looked at the barriers craftswomen face and how those shape their future in the industry.

Listening to Craftswomen

We combined the survey data from craftswomen with conversations we had with several of them to gain a better understanding of their experiences.

- First, we analyzed the survey. The survey included multiple-choice questions, which gave the participants a chance to share how they felt about different topics. There were also open-ended questions where they could provide more detailed responses in their own words.
- Next, to go even deeper, we sat down for one-on-one video chats with a smaller group of craftswomen in the trades. These conversations lasted about thirty minutes and provided each participant with space to talk openly about their personal journeys, the challenges they've faced, the support they've received, and what has made a difference for them. Hearing their stories firsthand gave us insights we couldn't get from a survey alone.

What We Learned from Women in the Trades

Several essential themes emerged from our analysis, each tying back to Super's Life-Space Career Theory, and emphasized how careers evolve over time and across the different roles people play in life. The themes we uncovered reflect this ongoing journey and include: (a) barriers that continue to make it hard for women to enter the skilled trades workforce, (b) challenges that hold them back from advancing in their careers, and (c) broader structural changes needed to create more inclusive workplaces where craftswomen can thrive at every stage.

Barriers to Career Entry

Starting a career in construction isn't always a straight path for craftswomen. Many don't get early exposure to the trades or hear about construction as an option while they are in school. Instead, craftswomen tend to find their way into the industry later, often after working in other fields that do not offer the opportunities they seek. Instead of a planned move into the trades, their entry into the construction industry is often through nontraditional routes - sometimes by chance, sometimes due to frustration with other careers that didn't deliver.

The interviews for this study found that several participants followed a path like this.

- Participant #3 had already trained in massage therapy and elder care before transitioning into construction. She mentioned that even though her background included high school welding and shop classes, a career in construction was never presented to her as an option. Instead, traditional career paths like nursing were pushed on her. She only considered construction as an act of spite or frustration when confronted by her boyfriend about what career she might like to have.

- Participant #1 worked in retail and office jobs before realizing she wasn't advancing, and only then decided to switch to working as a masonry craftswoman.
- Participant #2 found that her work on small construction-related projects on a farm –where she worked – was more enjoyable than she initially thought. She found fulfillment working with her hands on these small projects and decided to develop this passion further into a career as a craftswoman.
- The exception to this trend among the participants interviewed was Participant #4, whose entry into the industry was early in her career, during her early teens, and worked through an apprenticeship program within her high school.

Super's Life-Space Career Theory discusses the importance of early career exploration. Yet the lack of structured entry pathways for craftswomen in the trades demonstrates a significant challenge. Additionally, our participants' pathways into the construction industry, as illustrated by the interviews, show the trend that craftswomen in construction tend to enter later than men, often after experiencing dissatisfaction in other careers. This reinforces the need for better outreach programs targeting young women.

Workplace Culture and Gender Bias

Super's Life-Space Career Theory emphasizes that career development is not just about the job; it's also about how a person's various life roles, experiences, and environment shape their path over time. For many craftswomen in construction, the workplace is not just where they go; it's where their identity as a craft professional is formed.

As craftswomen working in the construction trades, many find themselves constantly needing to prove



The constant pressure on craftswomen to prove their skills and value can undermine their sense of security and hinder the development of stable, long-term careers.

they belong. This ongoing need to show their skills and worth can make it harder for them to feel secure and build steady, lasting careers.

Our survey participants revealed that gender bias continues to shape their daily work experiences. Of the craftswomen who answered, a majority reported having their expertise questioned by men, an overwhelming majority said they had been mistaken for someone less experienced, and that they were frequently interrupted or spoken over by male colleagues.

Within the open-ended responses, we identified themes regarding promotions and advancements that found that promotions were often perceived to go to men, not necessarily because of performance, but because of longstanding relationships, favoritism, or informal networks that women weren't part of.

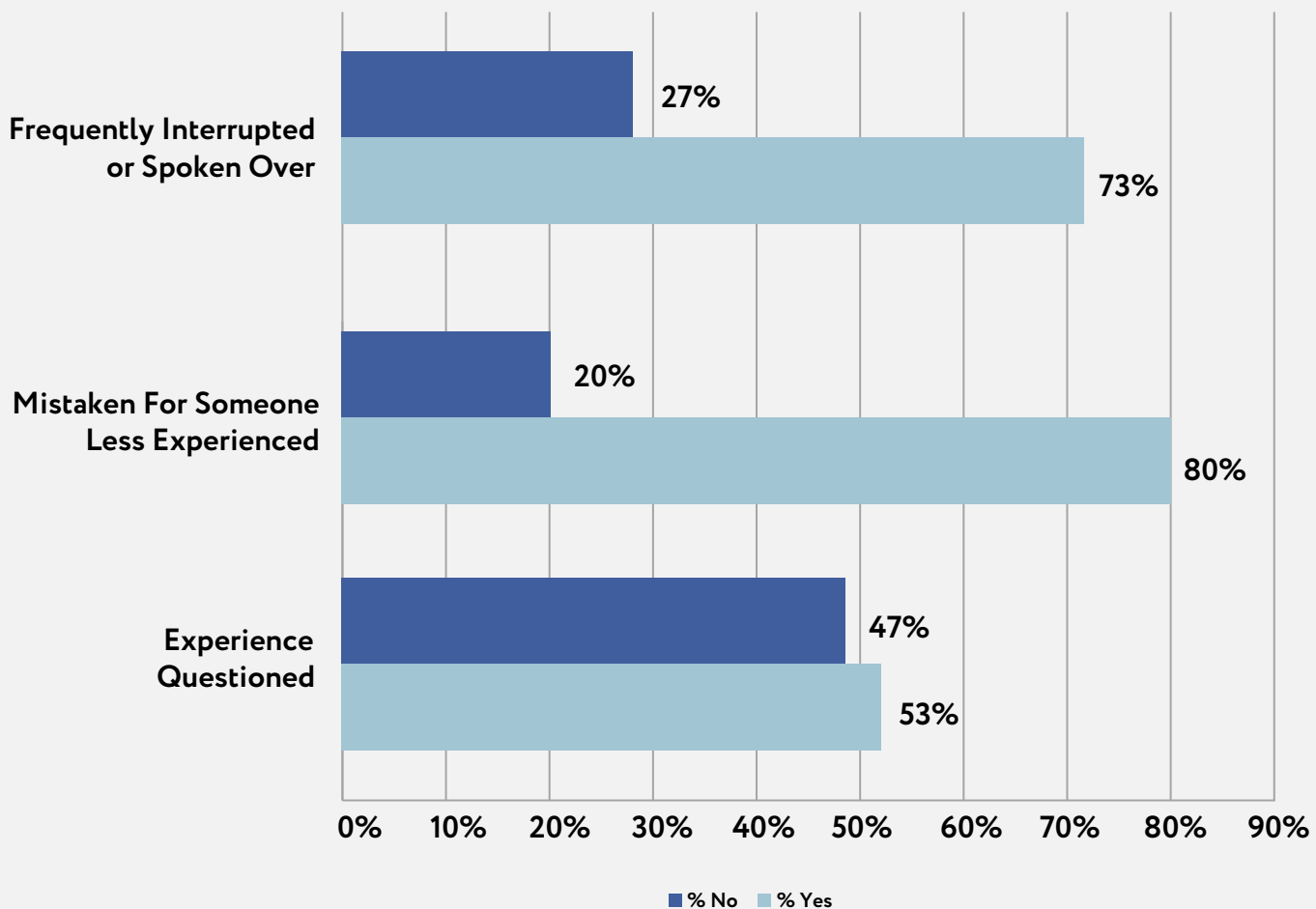
Throughout the interviews, we found similar themes and responses:

- Participant #1 shared that when she first started, she wasn't trusted with meaningful tasks. It took time, persistence, and proving herself

before she was seen as an equal by her male coworkers. She mentioned she initially expected more mentorship and help during her first few weeks and months, but instead found a "sink or swim" dynamic.

- Participant #2 echoed these feelings, but she pointed out that early friction during her training came more from her female peers than from the men in her workplace. She found a clique of women that stunted her ability to integrate effectively with the men in the group.

FIGURE 1 – Reports of Gender Bias in the Workplace



- Both women described a period of uncertainty and resistance, at a stage in their career development where support was lacking, and their identity as skilled professionals had yet to be fully accepted by those around them.

Super's theory reminds us that career development isn't just a matter of skill; it's also about how individuals are allowed to grow into their roles over time. Without recognition, support, and acceptance of their colleagues and companies, craftswomen in the trades may find it harder to move from the "exploration" phase of their career to the "establishment" and "maintenance" phases. These challenges increase the risk that they will leave the field altogether.

Without support, many craftswomen may never reach career stability — they leave the trades before they can truly grow. The industry risks losing their talent altogether.

Mentorship & Support

Super's theory emphasizes the role of mentorship and support in career persistence. One way organizations can counter the bias that many craftswomen find in their work worlds is to encourage and support craftswomen through employee resource groups, mentorship, or other sponsorship opportunities. However, of all the craftswomen who responded to the survey, none reported that their organizations had formal sponsorship programs.

This same absence of formal mentorship was found in our interviews as well.

- Participant #3 found it took a long time to find a mentor or colleague she could trust and learn from. She kept expecting her boss to establish a mentor, but when that was not provided, she realized she had to seek out and find her own mentor.
- Participant #1 also had no assigned mentor when she started. Instead, she relied on a fellow apprentice who informally taught her workplace norms, and she felt her company should have assigned someone to guide her.

Super's theory emphasizes that mentorship and sponsorship of women on the job play a critical role in retention and professional identity formation, yet the absence of formal mentorship programs remains a continual and consistent problem for craftswomen in construction.

PPE and Facilities on the Job

Super's theory reminds us that career development doesn't happen in isolation. Careers are shaped by the roles people play and the environments they move through at each stage of life and work. For craftswomen in the trades, that environment includes practical aspects of the job, such as the gear they wear and the facilities they use.

When job sites don't provide PPE or restrooms that fit the needs of craftswomen, it sends a clear and discouraging message about who organizations support on the jobsite. This creates barriers during the "establishment" and "maintenance" phases of a craftswoman's career path, where confidence, identity, and long-term fit with the role are being formed. This concern was expressed throughout the survey as well as in the interviews.

- In terms of PPE, such as fall prevention harnesses, Participant #1 acknowledged that women's harnesses existed but were more expensive. She had to deliberately ask and petition her boss for the company to purchase a gender-specific harness that fit her.

- Participant #4 had a similar experience regarding PPE when trying to find a fall protection harness that fit correctly and was forced to discuss the lack of an appropriate harness with the owner of her organization.
- Properly fitting gloves came up with two of the participants, with both mentioning that they are forced to hoard gloves specifically fitted for them, and that typical work gloves are far too large for their hands.

Similarly, all of the craftswomen who participated in our interviews discussed the challenges they face with facilities on site.

- None of the craftswomen were satisfied with the state of facilities, citing a lack of cleanliness, a lack of concern for their sanitation, and a lack of proactive measures by managers within their organizations to address these challenges.
- Several felt that portable facilities designed and built to support the handicapped would be a better solution for both men and women, as they would offer more room or separate facilities for the workforce. One participant stated, “It’s pretty hard to be comfortable in a porta-john with a man’s urinal right in front of your face when you use it.”
- Participant #2 refused to use the portable facilities provided by her organization on the jobsites due to their continual lack of cleanliness. Instead, she would find nearby restaurants or other facilities and use their restrooms.
- The above statements about PPE and facilities for craftswomen on the worksite suggest that even minor changes could significantly improve conditions and perceived support.

Career Retention & Long-Term Success

According to Super’s theory, long-term career development is shaped by how individuals grow into and maintain their professional identities through various life stages and roles. For craftswomen in construction, retaining a foothold in the trades requires more than just technical skill; it depends on feeling supported, valued, and able to visualize a future within the industry.

The craftswomen in this study reported that a lack of mentorship, limited advancement opportunities, and rigid organizational policies were key reasons they might leave their current roles or the industry. These barriers can disrupt a woman’s transition from the establishment stage (where individuals seek to build a career identity) to the maintenance stage (where they solidify that identity and gain stability). Without clear pathways for growth, the risk of attrition increases, not due to a lack of interest or capability, but because the support structures necessary for sustaining a long-term career simply aren’t there.

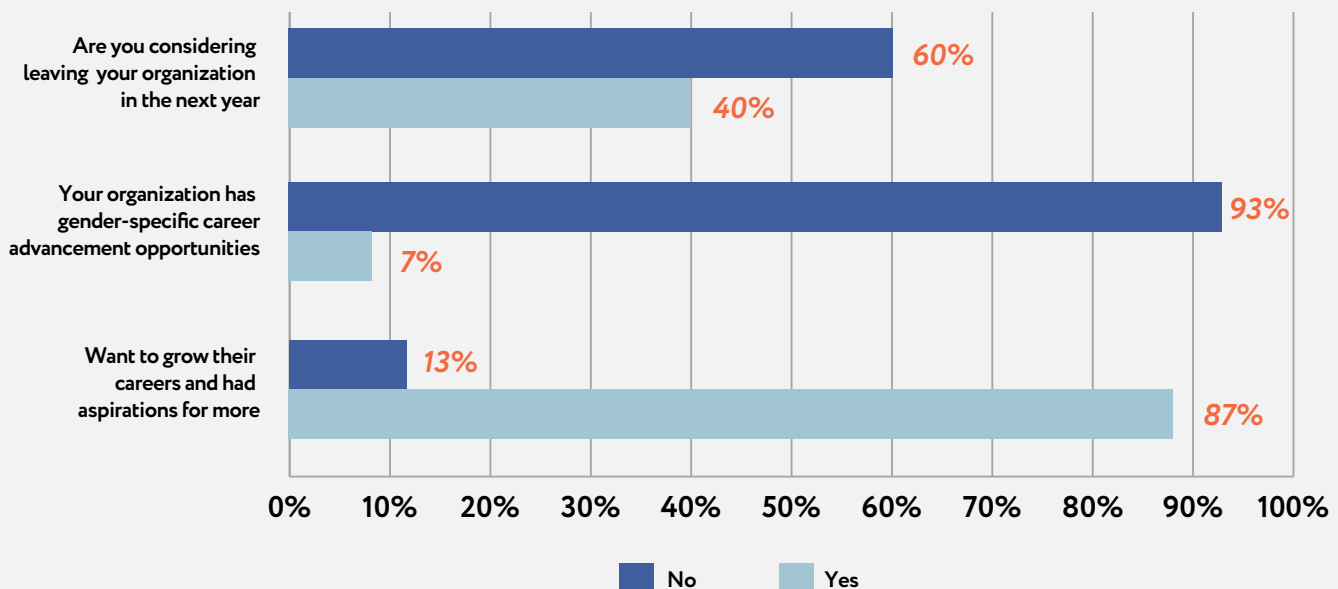


**Women aren’t leaving
the trades because they
lack talent — they’re leaving
because the system lacks support.**

Of all the craftswomen who answered this portion of the survey:

- Almost 90% stated they wanted to grow in their careers and had aspirations that included leadership roles, teaching, project management, and entrepreneurship.
- Only one participant indicated her organization had a career advancement program designed for women.
- More than half said they were considering leaving their current employer within the next year, and the rest cited lack of advancement as a main reason.
- The interviews, however, found a slightly different story, with the majority of the craftswomen in our discussions either actively mentoring or looking forward to mentoring others.
- Participant #1 expressed her deep satisfaction with her job and her intention to remain in the trades long-term.
- Both Participant #1 and Participant #3 mentioned actively mentoring other women. This suggests they've entered the "maintenance" phase of career development, where identity and purpose become intertwined with leadership and giving back.
- Participant #5 deliberately set up her business and mentored all of her workers to satisfy her desire to give back to the industry.

Career Retention & Long-Term Success



Building a Better Path Forward

Strengthen Recruitment and Early Career Support for Craftswomen Entering the Trades

Our analysis shows that many craftswomen in construction report stumbling into the trades by chance rather than through formal career pathways.

- **Start early:** Help young women discover the trades by connecting with high schools, community colleges, and workforce programs.
- **Break the stereotype:** Collaborate with teachers, counselors, and training programs to challenge outdated ideas about “men’s work” and demonstrate where women can succeed in trades in construction.
- **Make it hands-on:** Create opportunities like paid internships, job shadowing, and pre-apprenticeship programs that give women a real feel for the job.
- **Help fund the journey:** Offer scholarships or cover training costs for women ready to step into the trades.

Establish Formal Career Advancement and Mentorship Programs

Craftswomen in the skilled trades in construction often struggle with career progression due to the lack of formal mentorship and sponsorship programs.

- **Pair them up:** Create structured mentorship programs where experienced tradespeople can help guide craftswomen who are new to the field.
- **Show the way up:** Build clear paths for craftswomen to grow. Provide training, leadership development, and real chances to move up.

- **Back their potential:** Encourage company leaders, in the office and the field, to speak up for their female team members working in the skilled trades, recommend them for promotions and give them visibility.

Ensure Properly Fitted PPE for Craftswomen

Many craftswomen must purchase their own PPE because standard-issue gear does not properly fit their body sizes.

- **Stock it from the start:** Don’t wait for women to ask for custom or gender-specific PPE. Provide gloves, harnesses, and safety gear that actually fits without waiting to be asked.
- **Work with suppliers:** Partner with manufacturers to improve access to well-fitting, high-quality gear for craftswomen.

Improve Workplace Facilities to Accommodate Craftswomen

Workplace facilities, particularly restrooms, continue to be a significant issue for craftswomen in construction.

- **Keep it clean:** Ensure all job sites have restrooms that are clean, safe, and well-maintained for everyone — including women.
- **Don’t wait to be asked:** Don’t wait for craftswomen to ask ... realize that the need is there and that you as an organizational leader can fulfill the need before being asked.
- **Support working moms:** Provide private spaces for breastfeeding or pumping — it’s a small change that makes a big difference.

Address Workplace Culture and Gender Bias

Many craftswomen report having to work harder than their male colleagues to be taken seriously and to be considered for advancement.

- **Train the gatekeepers:** Give hiring managers and field leaders the tools to spot and stop bias so women get a fair shot at jobs and promotions.
- **Promote based on performance:** Build leadership policies that reward skill and results, not just who you know or how long you've been around.
- **Shine a light on success:** Highlight the stories of craftswomen thriving in the trades; they'll inspire the next generation to follow their lead.



Where We Go From Here

Our survey of craftswomen in the construction trades, along with the interviews we completed, indicate that despite strides in increasing female representation, significant challenges remain for both entry and retention.

Super's Life-Space Career Theory offers an insightful framework for examining the career paths of craftswomen in construction, highlighting the influence of life roles, external factors, and various career stages of their professional development. The findings suggest that the exploration phase remains a critical hurdle, as many craftswomen join the trades later in life due to limited exposure and encouragement during their formative career decision-making years.

However, the study underscores that when craftswomen in the trades are given access to opportunities, training, and inclusive work environments, they exhibit perseverance, ambition, and a strong commitment to career growth. Addressing the issues identified in this study and enacting meaningful reforms can not only foster a more supportive environment for craftswomen currently in the trades but also create a foundation for future generations of skilled female professionals.

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