



## 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

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### 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*

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## 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

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“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

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