Strategies for Increasing Female Representation in Construction Apprenticeship Programs

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INTRODUCTION
The construction industry has historically been male dominated, with women being significantly underrepresented in the sector. According to a report by the National Women’s Law Center, women make up only 3% of the construction workforce. This disparity is mirrored within federal apprenticeship construction programs, with only about 2.2% of active participants being women. The difference can be attributed to many factors, including cultural and societal biases around traditional workforce roles, as well as limited access to, and awareness of, training and apprenticeships.

Methods for improving female participation in construction apprenticeships include targeted outreach and recruitment, improving mentorship and support networks, addressing gaps in policy, promoting a work culture that is inclusive, and ensuring educational support. These methods require input and commitment from both mentorship programs and employers to ensure the respect and equal treatment of women in the workforce.

BACKGROUND
Although limited, data collected at both the state and federal level show that women complete apprenticeship programs in the construction field at a similar rate to men. Due to traditional societal gender roles, women are also more likely to be employed in office positions within construction companies rather than in labor positions, further perpetuating a gender divide in the type of work conducted within the industry. This suggests that the most impactful area of improvement is in recruitment and outreach for all types of construction apprenticeship positions, not solely clerical work.

SOLUTION
To increase women apprenticeship in construction trades, the following strategies have proven to be successful.

Outreach Programs and Recruitment Efforts:
To attract more women to the construction trades, target women in outreach and recruitment programs. This could include participating in job fairs, hosting workshops or career days, and partnering with organizations that focus on promoting women in non-traditional fields. Additionally, employers can work to make their job postings and recruitment materials more inclusive by avoiding gendered language and highlighting the benefits of diversity in the workplace.

An apprenticeship program in Illinois successfully partnered with local technical training schools, unions, and the National Institute for Women in Trades, Technology and Science (IWTTS) at the start of a program year to ensure women felt welcome and supported in applying for positions. This female-led organization attended events and provided direct technical assistance to the program, although results across varying construction programs was mixed. Some areas such as electrical saw noticeable increases in female participation, while others did not. It was suggested that more one-on-one mentorship time should be spent with youth in certain programs to ensure that participants receive adequate support in completion on the program, including accommodations and flexibility when they experience scheduling conflicts. In the case of an employer-led program where individualized support was provided, stronger relationships with trainees and employers were developed and program completion rates increased for both men and women in the program. Increasing female participation is a goal of this program moving forward, in which individualized mentoring will be made a priority for women and other under-represented groups.

Mentorship and Support Networks:
Providing mentorship and support networks for women apprentices can increase retention rates and ensure their success in the construction trades. This can include pairing apprentices with experienced female mentors who provide guidance and support throughout their training. Employers can also establish employee resource groups or affinity networks to provide an opportunity for women to connect with one another and share their experiences.

Lack of representation in skilled labor positions is believed to contribute to the low number of women entering into and staying in high skilled, labor focused positions in the field. A survey of midwestern tradeswomen showed that
having other women in the workplace had an overall positive impact on their experience on the job, applying to training programs, and eventually advancing in the field.

Inclusive Work Culture and Policies:
Creating an inclusive work culture is critical to retaining women in the construction trades. This can include implementing policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible scheduling and parental leave, and addressing issues related to harassment and discrimination.

An assessment of Oregon pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs showed that women with children or other family obligations were less likely to complete the full term of the program, mainly due to lack of flexibility in scheduling and hourly commitments. Men with similar home circumstances did not demonstrate the same trend, therefore it was concluded that women and other underrepresented groups would benefit from a less rigid structure for instruction and testing, or individualized program schedules.

Women are much more likely to experience sexual harassment in the construction field than in other career paths. As many as 88% of women in construction have reported being sexually harassed, versus only 25% of women in the workforce overall, according to a National Women’s Law Center report. Training for current employees regarding professional standards of behavior, as well as clearly defined policies for reporting abuse are the first steps that a company can take to address this issue. Sexual harassment is a major problem that employers must remediate to ensure that female employees feel safe and respected in the workplace.

Employers can also work to create a more welcoming and supportive workplace by providing training on diversity and inclusion and ensuring that women have access to the same opportunities for advancement as their male counterparts. Engaging women who are already in the field in higher tier positions can help bridge this gap and show new workers that gender diversity is possible in the trade fields.

BENEFITS
Construction occupations are in high-demand, with high-paying job prospects for both skilled and unskilled labor positions, which are only expected to grow over the coming decade. According to U.S. labor statistics, this affords women the opportunity to access to higher paying jobs, at almost twice the rate of many other female-dominated fields. Though the construction field has less female representation than other traditionally male fields, gender wage gaps are far less pronounced than in the general workforce. So, while there are many obstacles women face in entering this field, there are also opportunities to build a career where fair and equal pay are expected.

CONCLUSION
Increasing the number of women in the construction trades requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses the cultural, social, and economic barriers that have historically prevented women from entering the industry. This includes implementing tailored recruitment strategies that address the concerns women may have upon entering the field, ensuring the programs are flexible to the participants, and working with employers to improve policy and workplace culture.

This is also an opportunity to build partnerships between employers, apprenticeship programs, and local educational institutions so that women are supported as they learn the skills necessary to begin their career. By implementing the strategies outlined above, employers and industry leaders can help ensure that women have equal opportunities to succeed and thrive in the construction trades.

REFERENCES