

Posted on Thu, Aug. 30, 2012

This Labor Day, we need to tackle gender discrimination in the construction trades

By SUSAN EISENBERG |

last updated: August 31, 2012 08:11:58 AM

Women in the construction trades don't have much progress to celebrate this Labor Day.

Construction offers a wide range of challenging, satisfying, well-paid careers that appeal to women as well as men. Yet over the last three decades, women have gained no ground in this industry. We still represent only 2.3 percent of construction occupations, according to the Department of Labor's most recent statistics.

Back in 1978, when I began my career as an electrician, expectations were high that this gross underrepresentation would soon change. That year, goals and timetables were established that opened construction industry apprenticeships and jobs to women. This was the result of a lawsuit filed against the U.S. Department of Labor for failure to enforce the prohibition against employment discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

Federal policies issued under President Jimmy Carter laid out a path that should have led to women becoming 25 percent of the construction work force. Had the early vigorous monitoring and enforcement of affirmative action continued, this goal could have been attained. But after the Carter administration, the federal government stepped back, and entrenched discrimination reasserted itself.

Today, women comprise 14.6 percent of our active duty armed forces, and have made substantial progress across many career fields. During the three decades between 1981-2011, women moved from 4.4 percent to 20.7 percent of architects, 1.6 percent to 13.1 percent of civil engineers, 4.7 percent to 22.2 percent of dentists. But construction occupations remained stagnant: 1.8 percent to 1.9 percent for carpenters, 1.6 percent to 1.5 percent for electricians, 2.1 percent then and now for construction laborers.

The canard that women don't have the strength for construction jobs is even less valid today than when I entered the trades. Young women who grew up under the benefits of Title IX are certainly more physically capable than members of my "pioneer" generation. At the same time, today's construction industry uses lighter materials, more often lifts mechanically and requires teams that work and think flexibly.

The Department of Labor needs to shake off the three decades of inertia that has allowed the construction industry to view equal opportunity for women as optional.

On this Labor Day, let's honor the skilled women who succeed today as electricians, plumbers, painters, ironworkers, lineworkers and carpenters, despite their low numbers. And let's demand that our government enforce the anti-discrimination laws and finally open wide the gates of the construction trades to women.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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