

ORGANIZING FOR POWER

BUILDING A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
LABOR MOVEMENT IN BOSTON

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CHAPTER 10

Policy Group on Tradeswomen's Issues

A Collaborative Learning Community
Crushing the Barriers to Women's
Careers in the Construction Trades

Susan Moir and Elizabeth Skidmore

The authors of this story are two women: one is an academic researcher, and the other a carpenter who has moved into union leadership. Since 2008, we have collaborated on what one of us describes as a participatory action research (PAR) project and the other views as an organizing campaign. We share the goal of getting more women into the union construction trades. The results of this collaboration, and the industry partnerships that have been built, have changed the understanding and perception of gender in the construction industry in Massachusetts and have dramatically increased the number of women in the trades. We will tell you how this collaboration came about, where we see it going, and what ongoing challenges we continue to face.

In 2008, the research department at the Labor Resource Center at the UMass Boston was approached by a representative of the New England Regional Council of Carpenters. The carpenters' representative had been working to increase outreach and recruitment of women to apprenticeship in carpentry and union membership for twenty years. She and the labor center research director had previously worked together on issues of health and safety for tradeswomen and had co-authored a report on gender equity in pre-apprenticeship. This time, the carpenters' representative said to the researcher, "We have been trying and failing to

get more women into the trades for decades. We need a think tank. Can we pull together the smartest people we know who care about this?"¹

The story of how "Rosie the Riveter" was forced out of the factories at the end of World War II is well known. The contemporary history of the efforts, and failures, to open up male-dominated jobs in the construction trades to women, however, is less familiar.² As we began pulling together those "smartest people" we knew, we reviewed the story that tradeswomen had been living and creating since the 1970s. In April 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed Executive Order 11246 requiring that 6.9 percent of hours worked on federally funded construction projects be worked by women, a provision later made permanent. At that time, less than 3 percent of construction workers in the US were women.³ The policy change was driven by the women's movement's demands for wage equality and access to better paying jobs in male-dominated fields. Following EO 11246, a wave of young women, many of them college-educated feminists, entered the trades. These women and their allies formed Tradeswomen's Organizations around the country and started pre-apprenticeship programs to train women in basic construction skills and provide them with the information and support they needed to apply to construction apprenticeship programs.⁴ Women lobbied state and federal government agencies to provide funding for training. Hundreds of thousands of women went through these programs. Some undetermined number of those women pursued working in the trades by applying to apprentice programs or directly to contractors for employment. Occasionally, in some places the number of women working in construction increased to 5 and even 6 percent. However, most women never got through the application process; those who did were usually the first to be laid off when work slowed; the women who made it through the gauntlet that was the three- to five-year process from apprentice to journeywoman spent their working days in a hostile environment and spent their careers never seeing another woman at work.⁵

During this same era, participation by people of color (administratively termed "minorities") in the construction trades improved substantially, from a rate of 13 percent in the late 1960s to 20 percent in 2010 and 40 percent in 2020. Many factors have contributed to this change, including increased enforcement of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination laws, shifts in the racial demographics of the country, and other social changes following the Civil Rights and other social justice movements. The labor market also changed. The sons, nephews, and male family friends of white

construction workers had a near-monopoly on apprenticeship and jobs in the industry for generations. As that traditional labor pool benefited from the well-paid middle-class jobs of their fathers, more of them went to college and into white-collar work. The resulting labor shortage was filled in part by "minorities"—but that meant minority men. Thirty years after the 6.9 percent goal for women in federal construction projects was set, when the carpenter came to see the academic in 2008, the workforce was just over 2 percent women.

Creating a Learning Community for Social Change

After the federal target was established, tradeswomen formed organizations across the country. Massachusetts, and especially Boston, was one of the centers of tradeswomen's organizing. By the mid-1980s, an initial wave of women who had entered several trades, a group that included electricians, carpenters, and plumbers, had successfully completed their apprenticeships and gone on to become journey-level workers. Women in the Building Trades (WIBT) was founded in 1986 and offered women pre-apprenticeship classes for almost twenty years.⁶ The Boston Tradeswomen's Network (BTN) formed in 1990 to help women stay in the trades through mentoring and other forms of support. Although both organizations had dissolved by 2008, many of the people who had founded WIBT and BTN, or benefited from their efforts, were still around. At the recommendation of the researcher, those people—all of them women—were invited to attend a series of three to four meetings to review and evaluate their past efforts to increase the number of tradeswomen, and to explore the possibilities of a renewed initiative. This would not be the traditional think tank of a handful of professional experts; it would be a participatory process of community evaluation and knowledge building.

Outreach for the meetings was conducted by word-of-mouth, and twenty to thirty women showed up. In addition to current and former tradeswomen, several municipal, state, and federal government representatives who were involved in affirmative action policy and enforcement programs attended the meetings. These women had been working in isolation to enforce goals and support women entering the trades for years. The active participation of government representatives at this particular moment was not coincidental. The renewed interest in diversity issues nationally under the Obama administration and in

Massachusetts under Governor Deval Patrick's administration gave permission for lower-level officials to engage in this initiative. Patrick made his support for affirmative action explicit when he set up an Office of Access and Opportunity that was charged with pursuing racial and gender diversity issues across all state agencies.

The early meetings did not go smoothly. Old antagonisms and feuding factions who held each other responsible for the dissolution of various organizations came together in the room; tradeswomen who worked all day resented professional women who had the privilege and technology to make decisions; professional women, whose day jobs were to implement and enforce, contended with others' resentments over failed policies. Over several meetings, women aired their grievances and those who did not want to work with the group stopped coming. A decision on the name of the group solidified the commitment of those who remained. The name should not imply that this was an organization of tradeswomen or that the group would offer training. The name, they felt, should instead reflect the commitment to new ideas and strategies for reviving old efforts to increase women's access to good jobs in the construction trades. Before the end of 2008, the Policy Group on Tradeswomen's Issues (PGTI) was formed. Today, PGTI—a participatory research project and an organizing committee—is a learning community that shares knowledge, creates and evaluates practical strategies, and documents outcomes. It describes itself as a “multi-stakeholder collaboration of over seventy-five labor, community, government, and business partners that has been meeting every other month since 2008 with the singular purpose of crushing the barriers to women's entry into the construction trades. The PGTI goal is 20 percent tradeswomen by 2020.”⁷

The Question Is “How?”

Early on, PGTI participants shared an understanding that knowledge of what had been done to increase the number of women in the trades was “siloed.” Women in different trades and different unions had different experiences. Participants who worked in various government enforcement agencies had a great deal of information and experience, but these were subjective perspectives based on where they sat in the spectrum of government, labor, or community interest (or lack thereof) in affirmative action. The impulse for participants to generalize their own knowledge and experience dissolved quickly as it became clear that

the initiatives, and their successes and failures, were disparate and often unconnected. The first three years of PGTI was a phase of explicitly building relationships in order to break down the silos of knowledge and experience and mapping who was doing what, and where. The first policy decision that PGTI participants made was to reject the longstanding controversy over “double counting” demographic data. In the tradeswomen's movement and other places where affirmative action goals for women and people of color existed simultaneously, there had been decades of discussions and disagreement over how to count a woman of color—as a woman, as a person of color, or both? This was further complicated when there were residency targets. How would a woman of color who was a resident in a covered jurisdiction be counted? PGTI said this woman should be counted three times. The following position was adopted its first year: “We do not oppose—in fact, we support—double and triple counting of women as ‘female, minority and/or resident’ for the purposes of collecting diversity data. Insofar as women of color are double counted, it incentivizes their access to these jobs and that is a good thing.”⁸ In addition to gathering and sorting the knowledge of those who had worked to increase women's access to the trades, PGTI's researchers conducted an extensive review of the literature on women and the construction trades, including case studies of “Bright Spots,” or instances where women's participation had increased on single projects under intensive monitoring, only to fall back again to under 3 percent when the project was complete.

The 2011 PGTI report, *Unfinished Business: Building Equality for Women in the Construction Trades*, showed that the fundamental question of *why* women were not in the construction trades had been researched for decades, and the answers were consistent: women were not in the trades because they had been systematically excluded from apprenticeship and employment in male-controlled institutions, barring them from necessary education and exposure to relevant skills. These institutions have included all levels of construction industry stakeholders, from owners and developers who purchase and oversee construction, to the contractors and subcontractors who are the workers' employers, as well as the unions and apprenticeship programs that control the labor supply and train the workers. At every level, there has been historic discrimination and hostility toward women entering the construction trades and succeeding in them. *Unfinished Business* concludes that the “why” question has been answered many times and deserves no more

study. Women have not been in the construction trades because men have kept them out.

The question for the future—the one that can change the past failures—is *how* can women's participation in the construction trades be increased up to and beyond the legally mandated 6.9 percent?⁹ *Unfinished Business* documented that the industry's resistance to women entering the trades was in contradiction to the labor shortage that contractors and the industry's trade press had been lamenting since the mid-1990s.¹⁰ The average age of construction workers in 2010 was forty; in 2017, it was forty-six. There is a critical need for younger workers and the traditional pool of young male family members of construction workers is not filling the need. Despite their fathers' good wages and upward mobility, the sons have gone to college. While they may work on a construction site during summer breaks from college, after graduation they are working in an office. The relevant *why* questions, therefore, might instead be: why keep out a willing workforce when faced with a growing shortage of workers?¹¹

Unfinished Business also documented that the only viable career path for large numbers of women to enter the trades is through union apprenticeship. Numerous studies completed between 1998 and 2011 (see appendix) have found that while joint union apprenticeship programs have historically enrolled too few women, they still enroll twice as many women as nonunion programs. Contrary to commonly held but incorrect assumptions, joint union programs accept and graduate both women and people of color at much higher rates than nonunion programs.

PGTI participants spent three years building relationships, constructing baseline knowledge, and completing a foundational document. During those three years, the Massachusetts construction industry—like the industry nationally—was in the depths of the Great Recession. Fifty percent or more of building-trades workers were unemployed. Many had lost their health insurance and were running out of unemployment benefits. In a boom-and-bust industry, this was the deepest bust in decades. When PGTI participants began to raise questions of reviving efforts to increase the number of women in the trades, the response from many industry members was that it was not the right time. There were too many workers “on the bench” to think about bringing in new people. Within PGTI, discussions were focused on developing the alliances and strategies to push the issue as soon as doors began to open after the recession. When the door opened in 2011,

PGTI was well positioned to revive the movement and push for women to enter the trades.¹²

A Laboratory for How to Do It: The UMass Boston Project Labor Agreement

In 2010, Governor Patrick and the Metro Boston Building Trades Council (MetroBTC), the umbrella organization for Greater Boston's construction unions, negotiated a Project Labor Agreement (PLA) for the reconstruction of the UMass Boston campus. In a city with almost forty institutions of higher education, UMass Boston is the only public university. It was built in the 1970s on a landfill with notoriously shoddy construction amid a corruption scandal. Reconstruction of the campus was projected to take ten years and cost \$800 million.

Project Labor Agreements are pre-hire, union collective-bargaining agreements. Dating back to the 1930s, PLAs have ensured that major public works projects, such as the Hoover Dam and Cape Canaveral, were built safely and on time by skilled, qualified workers who were in turn guaranteed a good wage, job security, and health and pension benefits. The right of public entities to negotiate PLAs has been challenged and contested by the nonunion construction sector. In the case of UMass Boston—in no small part because the campus was so poorly built the first time—there was broad public and private agreement that construction needed to be closely monitored and that the workers who reconstructed the campus should have the benefits and protections of unionization. The UMass Boston PLA was standard in most respects: the work would be all union in exchange for a commitment for a negotiated process of labor disputes (“labor peace”), but it was unique in that it included very high workforce diversity requirements and the explicit commitment of the MetroBTC and its affiliated unions to provide the women, people of color, and Boston-resident workers who would meet those requirements. The diversity requirements modeled the City of Boston's Boston Resident Jobs Policy (BRJP), the highest diversity targets legally available at the time: 50 percent of construction workforce hours would be done by Boston residents, 25 percent by racial “minorities,” and 10 percent by women.¹³ As a state project, the diversity goals could have been set at the federal requirement of 15.3 percent minorities and 6.9 percent women. However, the unions and the Patrick administration chose to voluntarily include the BRJP's higher goals in the PLA, a groundbreaking development.

By contrast, in the 1980s and 1990s, the MetroBTC had opposed the creation and enforcement of the BRJP and all affirmative action efforts in construction. The UMass Boston PLA made a clean break with the exclusionary past of the building trades sector of the labor movement in Massachusetts and with the trades' historic resistance to any outside pressure to open up jobs to minorities and women.¹⁴

Meeting the goal for minorities would be a challenge, but it was attainable with the workforce available at the time. Since the mid-1990s, men of color had been entering the building trades in Massachusetts in larger numbers, and union projects in the city usually met the 25 percent "racial minority" benchmark. However, no progress had been made for women, and the local workforce rate was consistent with the national rate of 3 percent women. The unions would need tradeswomen to meet the goal they had agreed to. The newly elected head of the MetroBTC, Marty Walsh, initiated several recruitment efforts. He reached out to PGTI for advice; he met with the women of the Massachusetts Tradeswomen's Association (MTWA) to offer them his support and the support of the MetroBTC; he formed a partnership with the Boston Housing Authority, whose public housing residents were primarily women; and he established the MetroBTC's Building Pathways Pre-Apprenticeship Program to prepare people of color and women for entry into union apprenticeship programs. Since its founding, 40 percent of Building Pathways participants have been women and 80 percent of graduates have entered union apprenticeship.

In addition to setting high targets, the PLA included another innovation that would change the context for increasing women's participation in Massachusetts' construction workforce. It required the establishment of an Access and Opportunity Committee (AOC) that would monitor progress on the PLA diversity targets through an open and transparent process. The AOC would "serve as a central forum for representatives of all interested and affected individuals to exchange information and ideas and to advise the parties concerning the operation and results" of the new requirements. The AOC would also "assess the obstacles to success of achieving inclusion of minority and women workers in the construction opportunities and shall make recommendations for additional programmatic efforts to overcome some of those obstacles." PGTI participants, who had personally observed decades of similar initiatives that had failed to launch, lobbied for immediate commencement of the AOC and the inclusion of PGTI participants and other community representatives on the committee.

As it was with the earliest meetings of PGTI, the UMass Boston AOC got off to a slow and rocky start. An industry that for decades had been legally required to include women, but had never done so, had developed creative and customary processes to affirm the rightness and inevitability of excluding women. In early AOC meetings, a government or contractor representative responsible for enforcement would explain that no matter how hard contractors tried, it was impossible to find tradeswomen. They would blame the union. When the union came in the room and said they had the women, blame shifted down the hierarchy to the subcontractor. When various evasions and deceptions were exposed, the women themselves were blamed. "They just don't want to do this kind of work," an enforcement official would say. When that excuse was challenged with evidence that women do want these jobs, the representatives of the old way of doing things threw up their hands and just claimed it would never happen.

But it did. Over months and years and through persistence and the continual evolution of a participatory model of exploration, learning, and documenting, AOC participants developed a collective analysis of what would work and would not work to increase the number of women at work building UMass Boston. Individuals, most but not all women, took the ideas that were generated collectively in PGTI and in the AOC meetings and tried them out in the field. Intensive monitoring and regular communication generated a growing set of best practices that increased women's numbers on site and kept the women working. The result was that the first project under the UMass Boston PLA, the Integrated Sciences Complex (ISC), attained what no other project in Boston ever had. Women worked 10 percent of the work hours on the ISC every month of the 24 months it took to build it. Out of that success, PGTI collected the proven best practices in a manual of checklists that were customized for all "stakeholders" of the industry: construction owners, developers, managers, contractors, subcontractors, building trade unions, training and apprenticeship programs, and community-based organizations. *Finishing the Job: Best Practices for a Diverse Workforce in the Construction Industry* provides guidance to each level of the industry in how to change the way they have been doing things—the way that keeps women out. It shows them, instead, the practices that bring women in and train them for successful careers as tradespeople.¹⁵

We have identified many of the key lessons of the ISC. Here are two key examples, which we regard as "game changers": Firstly, we have found

that the truth is best learned when everyone is in the room. Contractors and union representatives have longstanding relationships. One may have worked for the other, or for his father. The union's business agent, meanwhile, is dependent on the contractor to get his members to work; the contractor is dependent on the agent for his workforce. They have been doing it this way for a long time. It is time-consuming to have multiple meetings with people who know or tell only half the story. It is much more effective to get everyone in the same room for corrective action meetings. In a business where the demands of the workforce are very fluid, wasting time can seriously impede changes if the job for the tradeswoman was completed last week. Secondly, if a woman is able to get on a contractor's core crew, the crew that goes to the job first and usually stays the longest, she may get more steady training and employment. Placing women on the core crew also reduces the problems that arise when contractors try to catch up with the required targets after the work has begun. "Catching up" causes both mathematical and human-resource problems. Mathematically, a contractor who has 0 percent women's hours for weeks at the beginning of a job may never be able to reach the 10 percent target before the crew is finished. The only means of catching up may be to replace male workers with tradeswomen, and that causes the human resource problem. PGTI has taken a strong public position against laying off tradesmen to add a tradeswoman to a crew. Not only will any woman who is added to the crew be blamed for the action, the support of union tradesmen is critical to the long-term goals of substantially increasing the number of women in the trades. That support is undermined by taking jobs from allies.

Finishing the Job and these game changers became tools for monitoring micro and short-term changes in women's participation on work sites. PGTI participants were also able to identify data for establishing baselines and assessing longer-term progress. The state Division of Apprentice Standards began reporting quarterly on the demographics of all registered apprentice programs. The City of Boston put years of data on women's (and "minority" and resident) work hours under the BRJP online. Initially, these data supported the local assumption that the rates of women working in the trades in Boston and enrolled in apprenticeship were slightly higher than the national rate at ± 4 percent (perhaps due to the visibility of tradeswomen's organizing in the 1980s and 1990s), but they were also flat. Data in later years have supported anecdotal speculation that approximately half of the women who are entering the

trades in Massachusetts are women of color. This in turn supports PGTI's advocacy of double counting and its practice encouraging unions and employers to privilege tradeswomen of color to meet their contractual obligation to secure a diverse workforce.

The PGTI Model: Integrating Supply and Demand

Along with the tools and best practices identified on the UMass Boston PLA, a larger theoretical framework emerged from a critique of the failed strategies of the past.¹⁶ This framework had three key pillars:

- There was a fatal gap in past efforts between the *goal* of increasing women working in the trades and the *strategy* of training women to enter apprenticeship.
- The bridge across that gap was jobs. The historical practice of recruiting and training women for these jobs was a failed strategy. Supply needed the other half: demand. And demand would only come in the form of jobs that had effective commitments to hiring women.
- The UMass Boston ISC would devolve into just another "Bright Spot"—that is, a single case of success followed by the expected cyclical decline—if the lessons learned were not applied widely across the regional industry and the demand for women working in construction was not expanded.

The theoretical framework that developed to guide PGTI is a regional strategy of integration of both supply and demand. The supply is shaped by training women for the industry, and the demand comes from enforcing the hiring goals that get women working in the trades on construction sites.

For nearly thirty years, as thousands of women went through pre-apprenticeship, there was a constant and plentiful supply of women wanting and waiting to enter the trades. That supply had no impact on the baseline rate of women's participation in the construction trades or on increasing the number of women in the trades. Training women had created a surplus labor pool, because there had been no demand for women to work in construction. Presumably, demand should have been driven by the 6.9 percent target for women's hours in all federally funded construction, but the demand was hypothetical because there was no enforcement. Why there was no enforcement, however, is a contested

question. The federal agency responsible for enforcement, the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCCP), has had such a light presence in the industry that it is unknown to many stakeholders. Fear of litigation that potentially could have resulted in the 6.9 percent target being declared illegal may have contributed to OFCCP's cautious approach to its mandated responsibility.¹⁷ However, an unenforced policy had no more impact on change than a policy overturned in the courts would have. PGTI's attempts to partner with OFCCP for greater government enforcement on regional construction projects that were covered by the federal target for women were exhaustive but ultimately ineffective.

But on the ISC and other projects that applied the best practices laid out in *Finishing the Job* and established AOC monitoring committees, women's participation on job sites was increasing. It was increasing because women were being hired by the contractors; there was demand for more women workers to meet the target of 10 percent imposed by the PLA. However, many of these contractors had been contractually obligated to hire women on other projects in the past. If they had worked on any project in Boston since 1980, they had signed a contract to hire 10 percent women. If they had ever worked on a federally funded project, they had committed to hire 6.9 percent women. What was different on the UMass Boston PLA? There was enforcement. Not government enforcement, which had proved to be non-existent and had contributed to a culture of flouting targets, but an open, public, and transparent process of continuous monitoring that developed through the community/labor partnerships and the collaborative efforts of those who participated in the AOC. It was critical that those reviewing the monthly progress on meeting workforce goals included more than just the owner and the general contractor or construction manager, which is how compliance meetings, if they were done at all, had been done in the past. By having the public in the room—in the form of PGTI, individual tradeswomen, the Building Trades Unions, community organizations, and community leaders—the construction industry “insiders” could no longer agree to not comply.

Given the success of the UMass Boston PLA in increasing women's access to work in the trades, the proven best practices of *Finishing the Job* and the model of continuous monitoring by the Access and Opportunity Committee were adopted by other projects. The largest and most visible is the Mass Gaming Commission's construction of two casinos. The \$800 million casino project in Springfield provided a platform for

expanding the work of the PGTI into western Massachusetts. With its 8 percent female workforce, the project exceeded the state and federal goals despite being in a rural area without Boston's history of organizing tradeswomen. At a second casino project in Greater Boston, 7 percent of the workers were women, and with over five hundred women working in total, it was likely the largest concentration of tradeswomen on any single construction work site anywhere in the country. The PGTI model is now being used in full or in part on about \$6.7 billion worth of construction in Massachusetts. But the most reliable benchmark for progress is the data on women in registered apprenticeship. A study of Massachusetts apprenticeship data between 1997 and 2007 found that 928 women were enrolled in registered programs over that ten-year period, or an average of 93 per year, and that the rate of participation for women was 3.4 percent of all apprentices. A second baseline was taken in 2012, when there were 180 union and non-union women apprentices, or 4.2 percent of all apprentices in the trades. Halfway through 2020, the union sector of construction apprenticeship reached 9.5 percent women, with 676 active women apprentices. Ninety-five percent of all female construction apprentices in Massachusetts are in union programs. Progress in the nonunion sector has been flat since 2014 and continues to reflect the national trend of 3 to 4 percent women apprentices. See Figure 1 for trends in the union and nonunion sectors over the past eight years.

The Future and Its Challenges

There is no doubt that current economic and political conditions in Boston have created a robust context for the success of the PGTI's supply and demand model. The city has been in the middle of a historic building boom, and Boston's construction workforce increased by 50 percent between 2010 and 2017.¹⁸ As of the end of 2019, the \$15 billion in new construction permits that have been approved by the city's planning agency guarantee that the demand for new tradespeople will continue to accelerate. PLAs with major developers ensure that most of the construction within the city is done by union workers. Political support for increasing both gender and racial diversity in the workforce is very strong. Martin J. Walsh, the Building Trades Council leader who first championed a more diverse workforce and supported the first PGTI project at UMass Boston, became the mayor of Boston and continued to support the advancement of women in the trades. His successor as

leader of the Metro BTC, Brian Doherty, has become a national voice for gender and racial justice and for opening the trades to historically excluded groups. Fourteen of the twenty-eight union apprenticeship programs in Massachusetts have increased their female participation by 20 percent or more in the past two years. Women are beginning to move into leadership positions as stewards and executive board members. The first woman of color business agent was brought on by the IBEW in the past year.¹⁹

The explicit goal of PGTI, “20 percent tradeswomen by 2020,” is not just a slogan. Research on past efforts to increase women in the trades has made very clear that incremental progress on women’s participation has not prevented cyclical setbacks. There is a historical pattern of “increase to 6 percent, drop back to 3 percent.” In each case where women’s numbers increased in response to activism around specific projects, the numbers have returned to the ~3 percent baseline when the project is complete. PGTI’s regional approach and integration of supply and demand will not thwart the boom-and-bust cycles of the construction industry. When the Massachusetts construction economy inevitably depresses in some unknown number of years, tradeswomen will be laid off and the most vulnerable will leave the industry. The goal is to break the “6 percent, 3 percent” pattern by bringing a much larger number of women into the industry during this boom end of the cycle.

A consequence of PGTI’s short-term successes is that, at the moment, there is a shortage of available qualified tradeswomen in the region. On AOC-monitored projects, the rate of tradeswomen on work sites is 7.5 percent—still too low, but twice the national average and above the federal 6.9 percent target. The demand for more tradeswomen comes both from reluctant contractors, who are pressured by AOC monitoring committees and from committed contractors who have bought into the goals and are increasing women’s participation on additional projects. To meet the increased demand, PGTI and Building Pathways have formed a nonprofit, the Northeast Center for Tradeswomen’s Equity (NCTE), to improve outreach and expand the pipeline to careers in the construction trades for women who might have no experience or knowledge of the opportunity. NCTE holds “Tradeswomen Tuesday” information sessions around the state at community colleges, career centers, high schools, and other locations, where women come to hear about how to enter the trades, and where working tradeswomen from the NCTE-sponsored “Tradeswomen’s Speakers Bureau” tell their stories

about how to get and stay in the trades. The Mass Gaming Commission has produced a public-service advertising campaign called “Build a Life That Works” on public transportation in Boston and Springfield. Over 18 percent of students in Massachusetts’ vocational technical high school construction preparatory programs are girls, and their teachers and guidance counselors have formed Mass Girls in Trades (MAGIT) to connect their female students with careers in the trades. The first two years of targeted outreach to women has resulted in a database of over fifteen hundred women, 80 percent of whom are women of color, interested and actively pursuing careers in the union trades. These women receive information on open apprenticeships every month in addition to other opportunities, such as workshops offered by the unions to increase the diversity of apprenticeship applicants.

Even as the pool of available and qualified women grows, we continue to identify gaps in the pipeline. Opportunities for women are very uneven across the trades, with the laborers exceeding 16 percent women apprentices, but some mechanical trades still lagging at under 4 percent. Recently, gaps in the pipeline between the union hall and the apprentice training centers have become clearer. Apprenticeship programs are not entirely responsive to the market’s labor demands. Program trustees control entry, and those in small programs continue to be reluctant to diversify their student bodies when it means not accepting as many of their traditional white male applicants. Unions, apprenticeship programs, and contractors make the greatest and fastest progress when they implement a practice of “Women First,” taking the best women candidates first and filling in their member, trainee, and labor needs with men second. It’s a radical idea, but one consistent with, and getting a boost from, larger social changes around gender.

“Women First” is both a theoretical paradigm and a radical organizing strategy. It is supported by PGTI’s first documented research finding, that women have been systematically excluded from construction work because of their gender, and by conclusive evidence from twelve years of confronting and crushing intractable sexist barriers in the industry through collaborative organizing and participatory research. It is irrefutable that throwing women at the closed doors of an entrenched sexist institution has not changed the nature of the industry or the position of women within it. As organizers, we have analyzed the sexist barriers and taken them on, one by one; as researchers, at every stage, we have asked previously unasked questions, like how can we move the

construction unions faster than their industry, the economy, and culture within which they live? Insofar as PGTI is a movement for the feminist transformation of an entire industry, partnership with the unions is indispensable, but not always reliable. Where the construction unions have led, groundbreaking changes in the region have happened; when progress has lagged, the unions have been tepid or absent partners.

The mashup of organizing and research that is PGTI provides a rich context for dialogue on this and other long-term questions and problems. We are guided by the mantra we recite together at the beginning of every PGTI meeting: *There is no silver bullet. We are in this together. We will never, never give up.*

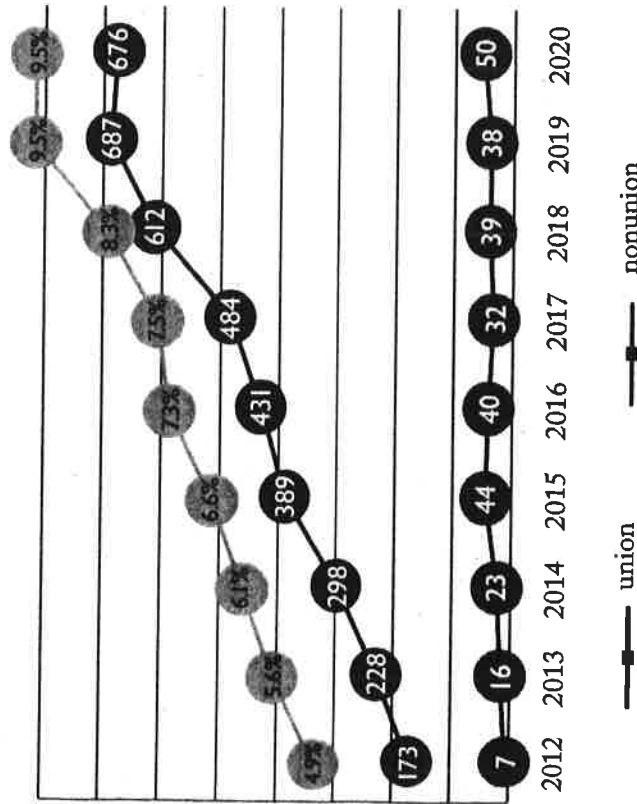


Figure 10.1: Trends in union and nonunion female construction apprentices in Massachusetts

NOTES

- 1 Susan Moir and Elizabeth Skidmore, "Designing a Pre-Apprenticeship Model for Women Entering and Succeeding in the Construction Trades," Report from the Center for Women and Work (University of Massachusetts Lowell, 2007).

- 2 Brigid O'Farrell and Suzanne Moore, "Unions, Hard Hats, and Women Workers," in *Women and Unions: Forming a Partnership* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1993); Kate Braid "The Culture of Construction, or Etiquette for the Non-Traditional," in Marjorie Griffin Cohen, ed., *Training the Excluded for Work* (Vancouver: BC Press, 2003); C. Goldin, "Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women," in P. Burstein, ed., *Equal Employment Opportunity: Labor Market Discrimination and Public Policy* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter Inc., 1994), 17–26.
- 3 Susan Eisenberg, *We'll Call You if We Need You: Women's Experiences Working in Construction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).
- 4 Barbara Byrd, "Great Work if You Can Get it: Women in the Skilled Trades," in M. C. King, ed., *Squaring Up: Policy Strategies to Raise Women's Incomes in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 200–25; Fran Moccio, *Live Wire: Women and Brotherhood in the Electrical Industry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); Vivian Price, "Race, Affirmative Action, and Women's Employment in US Highway Construction," *Feminist Economics* 8, no. 2 (2002).
- 5 Louise Vetter, "The Vocational Education Option for Women," in Sharon Harlan and Ronnie J. Steinberg, eds., *Job Training for Women: The Promise and Limits of Public Policy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 91–113; Susan Moir and L. S. Azaroff, "The Boston-Area Research Circle on Health and Safety for Women in Construction: An Innovative Participatory Method for Coloring in the Picture of a Special Work Environment," *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental & Occupational Health Policy* 17, nos. 1–2 (2007).
- 6 Women in the Building Trades Archive at Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, asteria.fivecolleges.edu/findaids/sophiasmith/mnsss500.html.
- 7 PGTI: The Policy Group on Tradeswomen's Issues, "About PGTI," www.policygroupontradeswomen.org.
- 8 It would be almost a decade before we had the data to demonstrate the power of this decision. Anecdotally, we could see that more women of color were interested in the trades and it appeared that more women of color were entering apprenticeship. By 2017, we had enough data to confirm this observation. Based on 2.5 million hours worked by women in the City of Boston in 2013 to 2019, we know that 54 percent of those hours were worked by women of color and that tradeswomen of color are in fact the majority in Boston.
- 9 The federal mandate of 6.9 percent women's hours covers federally funded construction. The state of Massachusetts has also mandated 6.9 percent women's hours on all public and publicly assisted construction in the state.
- 10 Susan Moir, Meryl Thomson, and Christa Kelleher, "Unfinished Business: Building Equality for Women in the Construction Trades," Labor Resource Center Publications 5, 2011.
- 11 C. Menches and D. Abraham, "Women in Construction: Tapping the Untapped Resource to Meet Future Demands," *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management* 133, no. 9 (2007): 701–7.
- 12 Erin Johansson and Benjamin Woods, "Building Career Opportunities for Women and People of Color: Breakthroughs in Construction," Jobs with Justice Education Fund and North American Building Trades Unions Tradeswomen Committee, November 2016, www.jwj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/JWJEDU_NABTU_Report_2016_OnlineVersion_small.pdf.
- 13 University of Massachusetts Building Authority, Project Labor Agreement for the UMass Boston Campus Between Building and Construction Trades Council of the Metropolitan District and the New England Regional Council of Carpenters, October 20, 2010, www.umassba.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Project-Labor-Agreement-for-UCRR-project-at-UMass-Boston-Campus.pdf.
- 14 Ravi K. Perry, "Governor Deval Patrick and the Representation of Massachusetts' Black Interests," *Trotter Review* 20, no. 1 (2012).
- 15 PGTI, "Finishing the Job: Best Practices for Diverse Workforce in the Construction Industry," May 2016, www.pgti.org/files.wordpress.com/2016/06/the-pgti-model-integrating-supply-and-demand-for-women-in-the-construction-industry.pdf.
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- 17 Fear of litigation has not been unfounded. The courts have repeatedly required proof of a disparity between those working in construction and those who claim exclusion and discrimination. PGTI is conducting Regional Workforce Disparity Studies to support enforcement efforts by municipalities. These studies have found substantial disparities between the number of women who are working in the construction trades and women in the region who are willing and able to enter the industry. See Sofya Aptekar, "Springfield Construction Industry Disparity Study," 2018, www.policygroupontradeswomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/springfield-disparity-study-4.18.pdf.
- 18 The Boston Planning & Development Agency, Research Division, "Boston's Economy 2019," www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/33993523-dce0-4cfd-903c-5eb8744733e8.
- 19 As this book goes to publication, we are in the sixth month of the Covid-19 pandemic and an era of unprecedented challenges for all aspects of public health and the economy. PGTI and its partners are focused on ensuring healthy work sites and continuing the progress toward fair employment for tradeswomen and tradespeople of color that has been made in Massachusetts over the past decade. We are in dialogue with industry leaders about the need to reject traditional ways of operating, such as lack of transparency in job placement and "last hired, first fired," that reinforced historic gender and racial discrimination in the construction workforce.