



# Four Key Barriers to Attracting Women to the Construction Trades

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The International Institute for Women in Construction exists to increase the effectiveness of the global construction industry in **attracting, developing, and retaining women** at every level and within all professions. Female participation in construction trades is of particular interest given the low representation numbers documented in our July 2025 report, *The Status of Women in the Construction Trades (USA) 2018 to 2024* (<https://iiwic.org/research>), A collaborative effort with **FMI and the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER)**, this report shared the percentage of women in each construction trade as reported by the US Bureau of Labor and Statistics. This includes US construction trades that experienced an increase in female participation (*drywall, electricians, elevators, plumbing, roofers, sheet metal, solar, and hazardous materials*), and those showing a decline (*boilermakers, carpenters, flooring, glaziers, insulation, and welding*). **In 2023, these trades experienced a range of female participation from 1.4% (glaziers) to 5.6% (sheet metal) with the exception of hazardous materials with over 30% female representation.**

**The purpose of this report is to synthesize global research on the critical barriers to attracting women into the construction trades.**

# Four Key Barrers to Attracting Women into Construction Trades

01

## Lack of Awareness of Construction as a Viable Career

Most young women do not understand the economic opportunity and job fulfillment enjoyed by people in the construction trades. This in part stems from the gender bias and stereotypes that exist about the construction industry, which many perceive to be a “man’s world” that is manual and too physically demanding for women. Gender socialization through education and family often guide girls toward traditionally female careers, at times due to a desire to protect women from perceived risks in male-dominated cultures. These career-related stereotypes take hold early, making construction careers unattractive to young women by the time they reach secondary school. Weak exposure to trades careers for girls and young women combined with male dominated hiring networks reduce entry. [WANTO 2023; DOL ETA 2023]

02

## Limited Access to Apprenticeship Programs

Despite growth in participation, women remain a small minority in construction apprenticeships. IWPR’s analysis of RAPIDS shows that 78.5% of construction programs had no women at all, with completion rates and retention stronger in union programs. Recruitment into construction trade apprenticeship programs often relies on word-of-mouth and social connections which favor established male networks and contribute to a “boys’ club” culture. Apprenticeship program advertisements frequently use male imagery, further reinforcing the perception of a male-dominated field. Even after entering apprenticeship programs, women apprentices report fewer chances to use tools, weaker on-the-job training quality, and fewer hours—slowing skill accumulation, reducing earnings, and increasing the risk of leaving.





## Unconscious Bias and the Dominant Culture of Construction, Including Harassment and Bullying.

Deeply ingrained gender stereotypes and the male dominated culture of construction are barriers to recruitment of women into the trades further exacerbated by the shortage of successful women as visible role models. There is a persistent belief that a "masculine body" is required to perform the work, and women's bodies are often seen as distracting. Research suggests that it is not the technical skills that are a challenge but rather comprising their identity as women to meet the demands of the workplace and having the ability to fit into the accepted behavior of the workplace.

NIOSH, CPWR, and peer reviewed studies document ill fitting PPE and limited sanitation/lactation facilities undermine safety and productivity and signals a non-inclusive culture. Harassment deters entry and drives exit—often compounded for women of color and LGBTQ+ workers. Largescale and qualitative studies describe frequent gender based harassment, a “yelling culture,” and isolation as the only woman on site.

Construction Industry Institute (CII) study RT370, presented at the joint CII and Construction User Roundtable (CURT) 2021 National Conference, utilized the General Social Survey (<https://gss.norc.org/>) to compare the workplace culture of the construction industry to that of other industries. Of note is that the score for “derogatory comments” was 36% more negative for the construction industry.

### The construction industry is challenged by derogatory comments.

CONSTRUCTION VS. NATIONAL WORKFORCE



Sources: University of Chicago, National Opinion Research Center, General Social Survey Database and 2020 RT370-Survey

## Lack of Work Schedule Flexibility, Travel Requirements, Childcare, and Lack of Work Stability

Project-based work, overtime variability, and travel create conflicts with caregiving. Women apprentices cite childcare difficulties, unstable hours, and unclear advancement prospects as top reasons for considering exit. There is also concern among the women workers of having to balance between successful career and family lives. From 11 For example, research findings reveal that male-dominated organisational cultures and inflexible working practices are the main barriers to women in the UK construction industry, irrespective of job role or profession.

Childcare is a persistent friction point, with few employers offering subsidies or onsite options, despite growing expectations for these benefits among younger workers. Meanwhile, the cyclical nature of construction work—with project-based employment and periodic slowdowns—undermines perceptions of job stability, especially in contrast to adjacent industries like manufacturing or logistics.

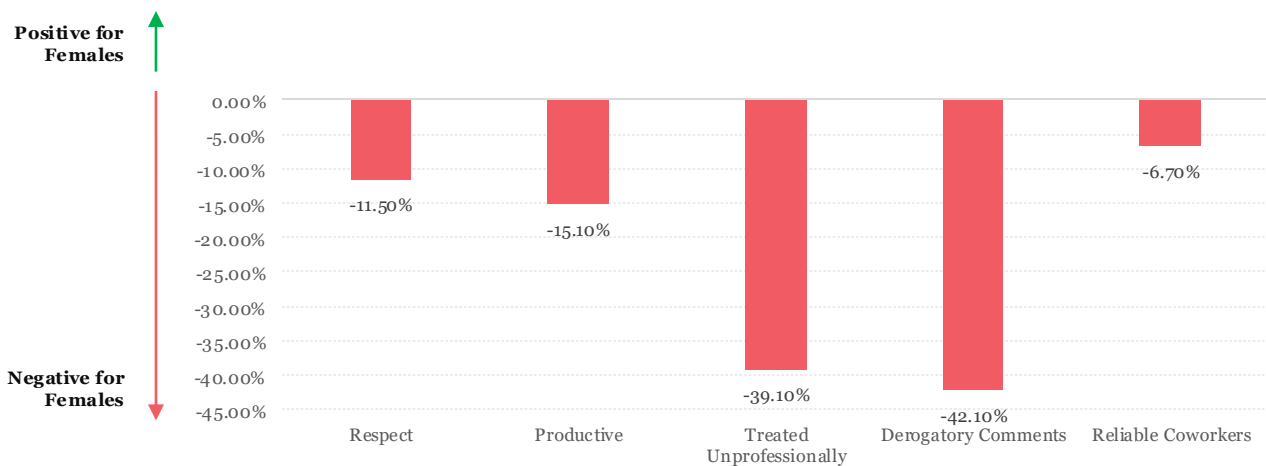
### These Barriers Transcend Gender

“During my first mining engineering summer internship, a superintendent at our rock quarry asked me to go find a tool that had dropped in a large puddle of water. After several minutes of searching, he walked over and said, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot. Someone already found that tool.’ This was one of many instances I experienced of being hazed on the job.” Male mining engineering intern.

However, women do have a significantly worse workplace experience.

### Females in construction have a significantly more negative work experience

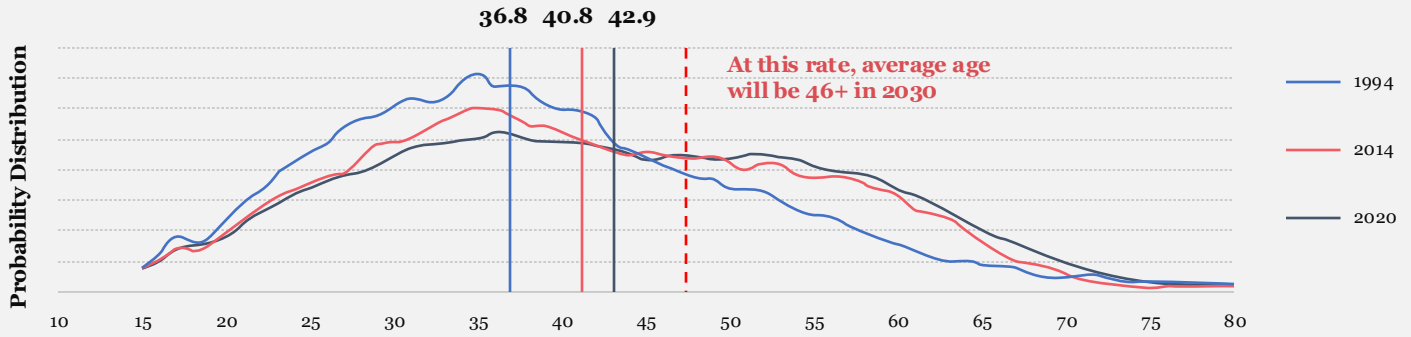
CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY:  
FEMALES VS. MALES



## The GenZ Recruitment Challenge

We need to realize that the construction industry is aging at a faster rate than other industries because of our inability to attract young workers to the industry, in part because of negative workplace experiences. Important to note from the CII RT 370 report is that young people of all genders are having a worse workplace experience than older employees, a critical problem for attracting people to the construction industry.

### Construction Is Aging Faster than Other Industries

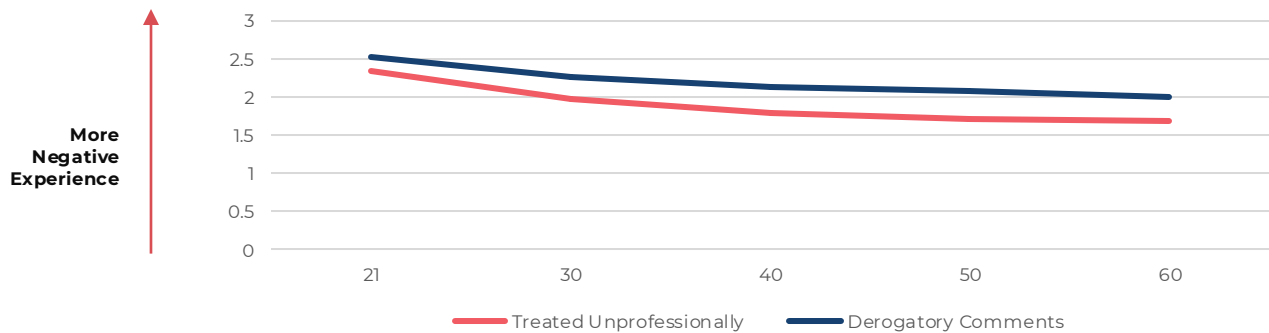


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)

### Younger workers have a more negative work experience

Data based on a Likert scale from 1-5

#### CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY: WORKFORCE CULTURE VS. AGE



Gen Z is beginning to enter the construction workforce at scale, but their impact is shaped as much by their absence as their presence. Despite making up a growing share of the general labor pool, only 10.8% of construction workers are under age 25, and Gen Z accounts for just 17% of total payroll in the industry. As the workforce ages—over 21% of construction workers are now 55 or older—the urgency to engage younger talent has intensified. This generation brings different expectations around purpose, flexibility, and inclusion, but they are not finding the construction sector broadly aligned to those values yet. Recruitment and retention remain core challenges, especially as construction competes with other industries offering clearer development pathways and more personalized benefits. These issues are compounded for women, who still represent just 11% of the U.S. construction workforce and an even lower share globally, at 8.7%. As firms seek to close workforce gaps, addressing gender disparities is no longer optional; it's a strategic imperative.



**This is a business designed by men for men and the culture is killing people off. The younger men, 35-45, they are overworked, and they are leaving. We treat people like a commodity. It's not that the leaders don't care. They don't know what to do so they don't do anything, they lack vision and creativity, vulnerability, all the stuff that's needed to shift to a more humanized culture.**

(Jackson, 2023).





## Conclusion

During the August 2025 National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC, <https://nawic.org/>) national conference, short film *Sista in the Brotherhood*, Directed by Dawn Jones Redstone with film co-writer Kjerstin Johnson was presented followed by a panel of successful tradeswomen. Unfortunately, one can easily image the scene portrayed of a young black woman carpenter not being taken seriously for her carpentry skills and asked to do the menial job of moving a stack of lumber from one location to another, and back. Understanding these four critical barriers to attracting women to the construction trades, and implementing strategies to overcome them, will do much to boost the percentage of women in the trades.

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