

# What It's \*Really\* Like to Be a Woman in the Construction Industry

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Construction is an industry perched on or at least near the top of the “super male-dominated industries” spectrum. Certainly female on-site construction workers are scarce, but women are almost as underrepresented in the industry at large. So I spoke to two women in the trenches—one a recent college graduate working as an office engineer and one a veteran project manager, both at large general contractors.

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Even after attending a male-dominated science and tech high school *and* completing a civil engineering major, it was only once Caroline, a 2014 Notre Dame graduate, started working that she questioned whether or not she and her female colleagues were being treated differently. “I have noticed that a lot of young women in the industry get mistaken for a secretary or an assistant just because they are young women,” she says. “Between this and being an entry-level employee, it can be difficult to distinguish whether you are being asked to do something because they genuinely need your help or because you’re the girl on the team.”

But when it comes to the actual work, Caroline feels the playing field is fairly level. “I feel like a lot is expected of

us, being recent college grads, and I think I get held to the same standards as my male counterparts, which I appreciate,” she says.

In project management of course, those standards mean that as a 23-year-old right out of college, you will be surrounded by a typically all-male, experienced team of on-site laborers—and be expected to manage them effectively. “The field labor staff is almost 100 percent male, so often when I’m directing field work I find myself making decisions and directing men who are 20 to 30 years older than me,” Caroline says. “Learning how to be comfortable in that position was a challenge—I started out with absolutely no idea how to approach it. I realized that the more you’re willing to ask questions and show you’re willing to learn from these guys who have so much more experience than I have, the more they become comfortable with a young woman being involved with the work and giving them direction. Once you start building that relationship of familiarity and trust, working together becomes second nature.”

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These sentiments were echoed almost exactly when I hit the fast-forward button on a typical construction career in project management. This time I spoke to Lynn, a project manager with Allen Construction since 2005, who started her career as a geologist behind a drill rig in 1989. In the past decade she has managed construction projects from small residential remodels to ground-up homes, commercial interior remodels to brand new restaurants, and her teams are almost always 100 percent male. When I asked what it was like being a woman in the industry early on in her career, Lynn said “uncomfortable” didn’t even begin to describe how she felt.

“There were *very* few women doing what I did and I would get the same look every time I met a new crew of men,” she says. “They just stood there staring for a few minutes, not sure how to act. Since I was in charge it took them a while to adjust since this was not standard in their industry. I always treated them with respect, but was clear about who called the shots.”

To ease the discomfort of the situation, Lynn says she often turned to humor until she and her crew got to know each other. “Once I knew a crew and they realized I was skilled at my job, we enjoyed working together. My approach is that most men I work with don’t really care what gender a leader is as long as he or she is competent. I try to give them some room to get used to the idea of a woman being in charge and let them see my capabilities. Usually it’s smooth sailing from there.”

Both women emphasized that while skill and competence are most important, women in construction absolutely do need to go the extra mile to prove themselves. “I do feel a sort of inherent need to prove to everyone else that I can keep up with the demands of the job,” Caroline says. “It’s a ‘macho’ industry where everybody works long hours and nobody wants to admit any weaknesses, which I think is at least partially due to the male domination of the industry.”

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Part of the struggle is that women need to go the extra mile to make their accomplishments seen—something that may not come naturally. “I can already tell in just a year of working that it seems women have to be more vocal about their successes in order to get the recognition they deserve,” Caroline says. “Men seem to naturally enjoy the battle of the egos whereas even if a woman is competitive, she doesn’t necessarily take part in the flaunting as much as men do.” Hurley agreed completely. “I have been overlooked for less qualified men and feel that I have to work harder to make my successes known,” she says. “Women don’t toot their horn as much as men and I find this doesn’t come naturally, so I have to consciously remind my male co-workers of my successes.”

This is one small piece of the industry’s biggest discrimination problem—the ubiquitous pay gap. “Women still do not command the same salaries as men and I consider that discrimination,” Lynn says. “This is a hill we are still climbing.”

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Ultimately though, after seven years in project management, Lynn is optimistic about the future for young women in the industry. “I don’t pretend that I’m not in the minority and that it takes some extra work, but I want to make the experience of working with me a positive one and set the tone for younger women who will follow,” Lynn says. “I think the time will come in another generation when women will not have to go this extra mile, but I chose this field knowing that I was stepping into a man’s field.”

At the same time, Lynn has found some benefits of being in the female minority throughout her career. “I bring a new approach and attitude to project management than some of the men,” she says. “It’s an advantage being a woman when working with homeowners during construction. I can show compassion and understanding when they are going through the upheavals inherent to construction. They are more comfortable confiding in a woman when it comes to these project hiccups, and that helps because I can offer solutions to ease the process.”

Her advice for the next generation of women in construction is both sobering and encouraging. “Be aware that you may have to work harder than the guy next to you for the same pay, but also know that you are well suited for your job based on your natural abilities to multi-task and negotiate,” she says. “It is a position of power and you need to be ready to carry the load and enjoy being in charge. If you do not like pressure or heavy responsibility this is not the job for you, but the rewards are great when you compile and manage a successful team and project.”

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