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Homophobia Hinders Women's Progress in Building Trades

(June 2014) – Despite women's interest in well-paying blue-collar careers, tradeswomen currently comprise less than two percent of the workforce in building trades nationwide. Being one of the few high-paying careers for people without a college degree, trade workers also benefit from having unions, yet the barriers to entry for women remain high. The issue has captured the attention of the White House which held a summit, "[The White House Summit on Working Families](#)," in June with a primary focus on women in the workforce.

A new study, "[Gendered Homophobia and the Contradictions of Workplace Discrimination for Women in the Building Trades](#)," published in the June 2014 issue of *Gender & Society*, a top-ranked journal in Gender Studies and Sociology, provides insight on the way gender and sexual discrimination dissuade women from joining the blue-collar ranks.

Sociologists Amy Denissen (California State University, Northridge) and Abigail Saguy (University of California, Los Angeles) interviewed 63 women and apprentices in the construction trades (including electricians, surveyors, carpenters, metal workers). The interviewees vary by race, age, years working in the trades, and sexual orientation.

Men's Work

Denissen and Saguy explain that when women enter trade work, men often feel threatened. This stems from the building trades being traditionally seen as “men’s work.” The study finds that tradeswomen are sexually objectified and occupationally discriminated against in an attempt to neutralize the threat tradeswomen pose to men’s right of privileged access to these lucrative careers.

While more than half of the women identified as straight, their male colleagues typically perceived them as lesbians and “not real women.” Tradesmen sexualize both straight and lesbian women legitimating them in the workplace.

Lesbian and Straight Tradeswomen

Because tradeswomen challenge stereotypes about femininity, both straight and lesbian tradeswomen are subject to homophobia. However, Denissen notes that lesbian tradeswomen face greater risks in navigating their sexual identity in the workplace.

Lesbian tradeswomen, in addition to facing additional scrutiny as women, must also assess whether to reveal or conceal their sexual identity. Whether tradeswomen are open, closed or selective about their sexual orientation, most are still subjected to hostile advances and face greater pressures when reporting these events.

Unsafe Working Conditions

- According to the research, women who complain are sometimes labeled as “sexual harassment lady” or “looking for a lawsuit.”
- One respondent, “fearing for her job, she initially refused to report a sexual assault incident but ultimately did so, upon the urging of the superintendent and the coworker who witnessed the assault.” She never saw the assailant again.
- Hostile working conditions included having electrical wires turned on while they were working on them, having tools dropped on them, or finding feces in their hard hat.

Tradeswomen Alliance

Lesbian tradeswomen are hesitant to join forces with other tradeswomen, gay or straight, to protect themselves and other tradeswomen from gendered homophobia and discrimination in the workplace. However, the authors note that there are coalition

building activities such as tradeswomen's conferences and active online tradeswomen's groups. More specifically, the authors suggest that encouraging men to join forces with women to work towards improved working conditions may prove most successful in eliminating gender and sexual discrimination in the trades.

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Source: Denissen, Amy and Saguy, Abigail. 2014. "[Gendered Homophobia and the Contradictions of Workplace Discrimination for Women in the Building Trades](#)" published in *June Gender & Society*.

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Contact: Abigail Saguy, Sociologist and Associate Professor, University of California, Los Angeles, reach her at saguy@soc.ucla.edu

Related Experts

Interviews available upon request

Kristen Schilt, Assistant Professor, University of Chicago, Author of "Just One of the Guys?: How Transmen Make Gender Visible in the Workplace." kschilt@uchicago.edu

Tessa Wright, Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management, University of London, Queen Mary, Author of "Uncovering sexuality and gender: an intersectional examination of women's experience in UK construction." t.wright@qmul.ac.uk

Amy Blackstone, Associate Professor and Chair, University of Maine, Co-author of "Sexual Harassment, Workplace Authority, and the Paradox of Power." amy.blackstone@umit.maine.edu

Further information

[Gender & Society](#) is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and gender studies. *Gender & Society*, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than seven percent of all papers submitted to it. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on twitter: [@Gend_Soc](#).

For more information, contact Gender & Society editor Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts. Her research and teaching focus is primarily on gender inequality. She can be reached at misra@soc.umass.edu.

[Sociologists for Women in Society](#) (SWS) currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women's lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Joey Sprague, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at jsprague@ku.edu. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook: [@socwomen](#) and [facebook.com/SocWomen](https://www.facebook.com/SocWomen).