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OCTOBER 5, 2011 | ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

### BUCKING THE TREND

#### Getting women back to work in the face of the “woman-cession”

By Anna Louie Sussman

Like **2.6 million other Americans** ([http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/09/news/economy/jobs\\_december/](http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/09/news/economy/jobs_december/)), Karin Serrano was laid off in 2008, her job as a compliance manager at a real estate management company one more victim of a recession precipitated by an imploding housing market.

But when she returned to work a year and a half later as a construction worker on the World Trade Center site, she was one of a much smaller group: only 85,000 of the 1.23 million jobs created since the recovery began in June 2009 have gone to women, or one in fifteen, according to **an analysis** (<http://www.nwlc.org/resource/modest-recovery-largely-leaves-women-behind>) by the Washington, D.C.-based group the National Women's Law Center.

When the recession hit in December 2007, men took the first hit: jobs in construction, real estate and finance, where men are overrepresented, vanished from the labor market. But the so-called “man-cession” has given way to yet another neologism: “the he-covey.” In fact, over the last two years, women's unemployment has risen while men re-enter the work force. As stimulus money dries up and states and municipalities struggle to balance their budgets, public sector jobs (of which women have already lost 72.3% in the last two years) will face further cuts.

These figures reflect a changing economy, in which certain sectors where women are overrepresented, like administrative and secretarial work, are in decline. Others in which they are underrepresented, like the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields, are projected to grow. Construction and extraction jobs are expected to grow at a rate of 1.2% through 2018, but women only make up 2.6% of the industry's employed.

Serrano, 37, and the single mother of two school-age children, never expected to be a power-tool-wielding, hard-hat-wearing tradeswoman. She had always wanted to learn construction skills, but was never encouraged to.

“It was always frowned upon us doing that,” she said. But one day her sister suggested she go to **Nontraditional Employment for Women** (<http://www.new-nyc.org/>), which trains women to enter the building trades. She saw an ad for NEW on the subway and rang them soon after. Following an eight-week training program, she entered an apprenticeship with a local union, and was down at the World Trade Center two months later.

Today, she earns as much as she did when she worked in real estate – around \$70,000, plus benefits – but gets to spend more time with her children, because she's no longer required to work extra-long, uncompensated days.

By contrast, said Maria Otero, founder and Executive Director of the **Women's Venture Fund** (<http://www.wvf-ny.org/>), the women she helps to launch and grow small businesses find themselves away from their families more than usual.

The Women's Venture Fund provides not only business skills training, but just as importantly, a place where women can “access other peoples' experience,” she said, in dealing with the “enormous guilt” that they often feel as they put in the hours to start their own businesses.

That guilt, said Otero, rarely holds back men, perhaps explaining why women are still less likely to be self-employed than men (5.5% compared to 8.3%). Despite the barriers facing them, women-owned businesses grew by over 20% from 2002 to 2007, according to census data.

Julie Abrams, the CEO of **Women's Initiative for Self Employment** (<http://www.womensinitiative.org/index.htm>), is convinced that these entrepreneurial women are the key to the country's economic recovery. She's seen how the low-income women with whom Women's Initiative works have gone from earning less than \$12,000 a year, to creating jobs for themselves and in their communities. In the past five years, their data shows, graduates have created 4,300 jobs across the five Northern California cities in which they operate. One dollar invested in the kind of comprehensive, strength-based approach to economic empowerment that Women's Initiative offers generates a \$30 return to the local economy.

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