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New York's Construction Boom Puts More Women in Hard Hats



Annie Tritt for The New York Times

Olga Aguilar, left, and Sandra Quinones installing netting on the 18th floor of the Brompton, a condominium building.

By ANNIE CORREAL

Olga Aguilar walked through a tunnel of scaffolding at 6:30 a.m. on a recent weekday and into the Brompton, a 20-story condominium building going up at 86th Street and Third Avenue in Manhattan.

Passing groups of men in the lobby, she made her way into the basement and through a maze of plywood shacks, and opened the door to one of them in a corner.

Inside, there were none of the Playboy centerfolds that typically line construction shacks. Instead, there were vitamins, moisturizing creams and energy drinks.

The shack — a cross between a locker room and a tool shed — is reserved for women. “This is unprecedented,” said Ms. Aguilar, 31, who is one of four women working as apprentice carpenters at the Brompton.

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Ms. Aguilar is part of a small but noteworthy shift in the construction industry: since 2005, more women have gone into the building trades in New York City than at any other period in history, according to trade union officials.

The women are training to be electricians, plumbers, steamfitters, ironworkers, bricklayers and, most often, carpenters. In the New York City District Council of Carpenters, 280 of 2,000 apprentices, or 14 percent, are women. Most are finding commercial construction jobs.

Though the work sites are decidedly male-dominated, the appearance of more women in hard hats is a result of a campaign by the city and some unions. In 2005, as a construction boom swept the city, Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) formed a commission to recruit members of minorities, military veterans, high-school dropouts and women into the building trades.

At the same time, local trade unions agreed to fill 10 percent of new positions in apprenticeship programs with women — the carpenter's union set its goal at 15 percent — and the State Department of Labor allowed women to jump to the front of the line when trade unions recruited apprentices instead of making them go through the traditional lottery system.

Two years ago, women made up 2.2 percent of the city's 175,400 construction workers, according to the [United States Census Bureau](#). That figure has inched up to about 3 percent today, industry officials said.

“We have a construction boom and a commitment by the unions to employ women,” said Amy Peterson, the local president of Nontraditional Employment for Women, a group that offers a free six-week training program in the building trades. “We can turn it around and make it not unusual to get women into construction.”

This year, the group placed 158 women in building trades apprenticeships, compared with 139 in 2006 and fewer than 50 in 2000.

For many women, the building trades represent an escape from poverty. Apprentice wages start at about \$16 an hour, plus benefits. After a five-year apprenticeship, a carpenter makes about \$42 an hour.

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For some, a construction apprenticeship also is an opportunity to start over. Yordanis Jusino, 23, took a plumbing class while she was serving a prison sentence for attempted murder and is now enrolled in night classes held by Nontraditional Employment for Women. "There's a big stigma," said Ms. Jusino, who lives in the Bronx and was 16 when she went to prison. "Everyone thinks that once you've been an inmate, you can't change."

Elaine Stanley, 28, is a third-year apprentice at the Brompton and part of a different group of women going into the building trades: those who have college degrees or are changing careers. Ms. Stanley was teaching sixth grade in the Bronx but had not decided on a permanent career when she learned about the Nontraditional Employment for Women training program in 2005. "I was interested and open," said Ms. Stanley, who added that she had long found architecture-related careers to be appealing.

Ms. Aguilar used to be a night manager at a bar in the West Village. "I knew from growing up that working with my hands was something that I enjoyed doing," said Ms. Aguilar, who helped her father, a factory worker originally from Guatemala, renovate a building when she was a girl growing up in Chicago.

From 6:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. every weekday, the apprentices at the Brompton unload tractor-trailers, deliver materials, erect metal frames, lay down insulation and strap themselves into harnesses to hang and repair safety netting. "We started this building," Ms. Aguilar said.

Elly Spicer has a rare perspective on how the construction industry has changed. She has been a construction worker and an organizer in the carpenters' union for 22 years, and there was a time, she said, that "if a woman set down her hard hat, she could pick it up to find a male co-worker had used it as a toilet."

When Tamara Rivera, 41, became a carpenter's apprentice in 1994, she said, foremen routinely ignored her when handing out assignments. Co-workers would call her "butch" or, conversely, "precious." She often did not have a separate bathroom to use. "Sixty guys, and I would be the only girl," she said. Now, she added, "you might still be the only girl, but the attitude is changing."

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There is a new camaraderie between men and women in unions that veteran women carpenters said was once unheard of. "They're just happy that you can pull your weight," said Eva Paz, 36, a second-year apprentice in the carpenters' union, who has a "No Cry Baby" sticker on her hard hat.

Dane Finley, 50, a shop steward at the Brompton who has been a construction worker for 28 years, said: "When there's ladies on the job, you can't be animals, knuckleheads. It changes the way everyone acts."

Pat A. Di Filippo, executive vice president of Turner Construction Company, one of the city's largest general contractors, said: "Women are finding this is a business, that it is not the boys' club it once was. It's a business that needs people to perform tasks, and you're a woman who can do that task."

The foothold that women have gained during the construction boom may expand in the coming years. Developers working on large projects at the World Trade Center site and the [Atlantic Yards](#) complex in Brooklyn are aiming to employ a work force that is at least 15 percent women.

"As long as the industry remains strong, there will be continued opportunities for women and minorities to join the building trades," said Louis J. Coletti, president of the Building Trades Employers Association, which represents 1,500 contractors in the city that employ union workers.

But what will happen when construction slows is an open question.

"I do fear that," said Ms. Stanley, the former teacher. "That's why I try to learn as much as I can, so when that happens, I will have a reputation and people looking out for me."

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