

BREAKING GROUND

By Nico Cassanetti

A man sporting a utility belt, hard hat and neon vest is the typical image of a construction worker, but it's time to change that impression. Sources show women in construction are becoming more common.

In 2010, women comprised nine percent of workers in the construction industry, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This figure includes all occupation sectors in construction, like sales and office jobs, where women make up 76 percent of the sector. Nine percent is a small percentage in comparison to other industries, such as retail (46 percent), finance (54 percent) and public administration (45 percent).

"There still aren't that many women who are in what you would call a nontraditional field," said Jo Moore, environmental director at Ranger Construction Industries, Inc. in West Palm Beach, who has worked in the construction industry since 1976. "It is still a man's world industry. There's a hesitation for women to step into this field. The jobs themselves pay better—a job running the dozer is \$15

an hour; a job as a maid in a hotel is \$7.52. They don't know where to get the training, and the disparity now is that jobs women choose to do pay less because of it."

Although construction has been hit hard with the recession, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics states that it is still one of the largest industries in the nation. "As this job market turns around, companies are looking for women to meet the needs. There were a lot of men who retired when the markets went bad, and when construction was suffering, many men went to different vocations," said Dede Hughes, the executive vice president of The National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), an organization founded in 1953 to advance the causes of all women in construction.

Colleges are now offering programs specifically geared toward helping women break into the field. Arizona State University's Del E. Webb School of Construction has a current female enrollment of 18 percent. Its Women in Construction program pairs female students with women in the industry

to get firsthand knowledge of what it takes to be successful in the business. "You have to put out a positive force so that young women can see this is a viable industry," said Hughes.

In the meantime there are day-to-day obstacles to overcome. For example, as minorities in the industry, women encounter improperly fitting protective equipment, such as hard hats and harnesses, and lack of access to sanitary facilities. In August 2013, NAWIC signed an alliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)—a partnership that has been in the works for more than two years—petitioning for the safety and protection of women in the field.

"Every day I hear about young women who have just graduated from college and are going into engineering, but stopping through a construction business before doing so," said Jennifer Sarmiento, co-owner and founder of Classic Renovation Company in Washington, D.C. "More and more of my inspections are done by women, so I think that is a good indication that the female community here is growing." ■