

**Increasing Women in Nontraditional Occupations:  
The Organized Building Trades as a Pathway to Self-Sufficiency**  
Sharon Golden

The organized building trades are lucrative careers that provide many folks with an income that can support a family. Union trade workers are mostly men; women only comprise about 4% of the rank and file union members in the United States (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). Building trade contracts include pre-determined pay increases, health, welfare and retirement benefits that are unmatched in any other career. Marx explains the structure of 'free labor,' that people are allowed to quit working for one employer and can choose to work for another, but that they aren't free to not sell their life activity for wages. (Marx, Wage, Labor and Capital)

If everyone is free to choose their employer, why are women comprising the vast number of people who decide to go into debt to attend university? Why do women comprise the vast number of underpaid reproductive work in the larger society? I ask myself these questions because I question why I made these choices; I chose the debt-to-career path myself, like so many women do.

There are many reasons that can be attributed to deterring women from pursuing a career in the organized building trades. First, positive images that expose kids to a vast array of jobs expands what girls and boys believe they are capable of doing themselves. Second, with the dwindling union movement in the United States, not many folks consider the more obscure industrial trades as a potential career choice. Third, there are false, yet pervasive narratives concerning pay and manual labor careers. In this essay, I argue that there are many social factors that contribute

to women not pursuing these careers, and I discuss potential investment and policy opportunities to address this disparity.

All children tend to emulate and perform what they see, especially if these actions assimilate to and perpetuate culture norms. If a little girl sees their mother cooking for their family, they tend to internalize cooking as a way to perform their gender role. In *Developing Positive Self-Images and Discipline in Black Children*, author Jawanza Kunjufu discusses how childhood experiences and culture potentially influence the child's future. Kunjufu states that, "Children, more so than adults, are great emulators. This is why it's so important for children to have positive role models" (Kunjufu, pp.23).

Similarly to how race can be internalized by images in childhood, so can gender. Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that gender is imposed on us at birth, and then we perform gender repeatedly as we interact with society. If young girls don't see the success of self-identified women working in the building trades, they are less likely to pursue those careers themselves. Many will either choose the debt-to-career college path, while other women will continue to work in underpaid or unpaid reproductive work. (Butler)

After gender roles are internalized in young children, the influence on gender-conforming career choices comes during K-12 schooling. Social norms—related to gender and beyond—are reinforced by fellow classmates, teachers and counselors. Students and peer-pressure amplify social assimilation through a 'girls do this, boys do this' narrative that can play out as teasing kids that venture outside of gender norms, such as calling a girl that likes sports a 'tomboy.'

Another impactful social assimilation in primary, middle and high schools is that the adults in the space are guiding all kids into the college-to-career path.

Teachers in K-12 schools often view their jobs as preparing children for college, not so much preparing them for the real world, nor the opportunities that are outside of that path. K-12 teachers—along with the rest of society—speak to students as if the college-to-career path is the only path for a person to be a successful and functioning adult. Additionally, high school counselors—referred to as ‘college counselors’ in my high school—push the college-to-career track on all students. Many of them have very little knowledge of unions outside of their own, and certainly don’t know enough about building trades opportunities. If a teen girl hasn’t seen women perform a job in trades because the field is male-dominated, these careers are considered jobs for men. Then, when high school teachers and counselors reify the college-to-career path as the presumed logical next step after graduation, women reasonably perceive that their only option to a good career is the college-to-career path.

While combating the narrative of what is considered a traditional path towards a high paying career, there is also false narrative that oozes from high school teachers and counselors: The building trades are low-paying and manual labor, often spoken of in a tone that presents manual labor jobs as ‘less-than’ careers compared to the college-to-career path. In reality, building trade apprentices are paid a competitive wage from the outset. In addition to a living wage, unions have retirement packages and grandfathered in ‘cadillac’ healthcare plans that were phased out post-Affordable Care Act of 2010.

The prevailing wage set forth by the state of California gives a glimpse of pay for apprentices and journey-level trade workers broken down by county. Pay for apprentices are broken down by experience level, commonly referenced in 6 month periods. In Alameda County, Laborers—often considered an entry-level trade with

only a two-year long apprenticeship—have a prevailing wage that starts at \$32.96/hour and the 4th-period total pay at \$56.91/hr. The skilled Steamfitter 10th-period apprentice makes \$103.81/hr. To be clear, some of this hourly wage goes into pension, and health and welfare packages, but the take-home pay for the 10th period Steamfitter is still \$59.46/hr. More compelling than pay alone, wages and raises alike are predetermined and contractually agreed upon. Women in the building trades know that they are making the same wage as their male counterparts, which isn't true in the other non-union career paths.

Compared to the average college graduate who as of 2020 earned about \$55,000/year, the trades worker never went into debt for training and earn more money in their fifth year than the recent college graduate (“Salaries for College Graduates Climb Even in the Face of the Pandemic”). Instead of the college to career path where individuals fund their own training, apprenticeships are paid for by union and employer Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committees (JATC), not the apprentice. This allows apprentices to immediately enter the workforce in a stronger economic position than the person who takes the college-to-career track—who often goes into debt to fund their own training by going to a 4-year college.

Wendy Brown expands on Marx's work by coining the term “homoeconomicus,” where people tend to think about themselves and what they do in economic terms. People go into debt to attend university considering the debt is an investment in their future. The narrative of the debt-ridden college-to-career track is that pursuing education—regardless of the price—is the best way to obtain a high-paying career. However, this narrative is increasingly untrue for many graduates of the college-to-career track, many of whom are only able to find low-paying service sector jobs. Graduates aren't guaranteed a high paying career after they obtain their

degrees, but the debt they accrued paying for tuition is a sure thing. Brown argues that people consider themselves in economic terms, and 'return on investment' is common nomenclature on college websites. Somehow, going into debt for a career has escaped homoœconomicus' rational and fiscal mind. People continue to act against their own self-interest, not in-tune with the reality that they are going into a massive amount of debt to attend college. They are driven by the false narrative that going to college will secure them a higher paying career after graduation, despite universities not providing job placement assistance included with the high price of tuition. (Brown, Undoing Demos)

This is especially true because not all colleges are socially considered equal despite similar costs. West Virginia University (WVU) and University of California, Berkeley (UCB) have different reputations. While students at both schools pay about the same, the prestige of WVU and UCB aren't the same. I mention this because there are many more schools on tier with WVU in the United States, and exponentially more students going into debt to attend those colleges. While the return on investment at a Tier 1 school of academic excellence like UCB is high, this is not true about all of the universities in the United States.

Cengage College Opportunity Index 2019 noted that students are highly optimistic about their salary and job prospects after graduation, "but some may be in for a surprise," noting that 73% of near or recent graduates in the west and northeast said that they would have to move to find a house that they can afford to buy (2019 Cengage Student Opportunity Index, 2019). For most college graduates in the United States, the return on investment is low. Meanwhile in the trades, apprentices earn so much money that unions have included money management lessons in

JATC's because apprentices get their large first paycheck and frequently go on shopping sprees and buy new cars that they aren't ready to afford.

Encouraging debt isn't just prevalent in education, it's pervasive in other parts of the economy as well. For many folks, a student loan is the first introduction into personal finance and they do not have the familiarity or capacity to understand the full breadth of what they are getting into. Especially true for those who are younger, students impacted by their 'present bias,' or the tendency to favor present conditions and discount their future selves, don't feel like the loans are real. They click to accept a loan offered for amounts that they would not be approved for if they were purchasing a car.

A recent article in the *New York Times*, *Men Fall Behind in Education, Women Still Play Catch Up at Work* provides insight in another way. The article mentions that women comprise nearly 58% of college undergraduates. Kenyan College has even rejected female applicants, not because of lack of merit, but because, "...gender balance matters in ways both large and small on a residential college campus. Once you become decidedly female in enrollment, fewer males and, as it turns out, fewer females find your campus attractive" (Carey).

The article continues to highlight that society imposes ideologies that nearly require women to spend more money and time to be competitive with men who perform the same job. In 2020, women in the United States only earned 84% of what their male counterparts made. The repercussions of this was only exasperated by the pandemic when women left the workforce, and decided to enroll or re-enroll in school.

In *Seeing with the Pandemic: Social Reproduction in the Spotlight*, Leslie Salzinger explains that the Covid-19 pandemic made visible the increased

responsibility of women who have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts, especially in regard to tasks related to the reproduction of labor. Women were stratified into two classes as a result of the lock-down orders. Low-income women were to continue their jobs as 'essential workers,' while professional women were able to work from home, with the added responsibility of child-rearing -since daycares and schools were also closed. Some women were driven out of the workforce altogether in order to perform unpaid reproductive labor in their homes. The lack of the social safety net during the covid pandemic set women back in many ways, but the dependence on the government or reliance on a partner's waged work is glaring.

Construction job sites were shuttered for three weeks at the beginning of the pandemic until it was added to the list of essential work. However, the risk associated with this work wasn't exasperated by the pandemic like the lower paying reproductive essential jobs were. A lot of building construction work is outdoors, and the workers don't deal with the larger public like service sector essential workers do. For the most part, folks in construction trades were able to view the time off as an unexpected vacation because they were able to afford the cost of living (coupled with unemployment insurance benefits) while the government and lobbyists worked to get construction classified as essential work.

Why did women decide to re-enroll in school rather than pursuing a high paid career in the organized building trades in the ripples of the pandemic? To dissect this, it is important to understand the rise of neoliberalism and its influence on what is considered socially 'normal' today. The neoliberal era started in the 1970's, at a time when there was so much stuff made to be purchased, the idea of financial value became attached to things that weren't previously considered as an avenue for

capitalists to generate profits. Public universities went from being a place to learn to being a place where one has the *opportunity* to go into debt and invest in their future selves.

All schools—from kindergarten to university—are a part of what can be referred to as an education industrial complex. Ivan Illiach, an Austrian priest and social critic once said, “School is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is.” Higher education is particularly costly, and yet, the idea to get a Bachelor’s degree from a higher learning institution still dominates traditional values.

Along with the rise of neoliberalism also came the rise of the Professional Managerial Class (PMC), a term first coined by Barbara and John Ehrenreich in 1977, to illuminate the contrast between two different groups that both comprised the middle class: the working class and the PMC. In *Virtue Hoarders: The case against the Professional Managerial Class*, Catherine Liu, a professor at University of California, Irvine said:

Today’s PMC may not wear pocket protectors, but it has overseen the devastation of the lives and livelihoods of poor and working class Americans of all races, genders, and sexualities in the name of equality of opportunity, competitiveness, austerity and efficiency. Since the 1970’s, PMC elites have been happy to abandon mass politics to reproduce the social division of labor and the widening gulf between those who prosper under late-capitalism and those who do not. (Liu, pp.7)

The PMC went to college to get an education and landed good paying jobs. In their view, their hard work got them to where they are, particularly because they did things the way they were *supposed* to -by going to college. Once they advanced in

society by landing a high-paid career, their bootstrapped-individualism influenced their politics and views of the working class. As the decades progressed, education has become more expensive and jobs pay less when adjusted for inflation, but these facts don't influence the PMC's personal politics. Their narrative is that credentials from universities create a more valuable member of society, regardless of the increased cost of higher education over the decades.

The rise of PMC's credentialism is "the last acceptable prejudice" as said by Matt Taibbi when discussing Micheal Sandal's recently published book *The Tyranny of Merit*. Taibbi synthesized Sandal's thesis stating: "We Americans have been so conditioned to believe that winners deserve to win that we've found a way to hate losers of any kind as moral failures... especially when lack of education is seen as a factor" (Taibbi and Miller). This idea permeates every aspect of current society and culture, and has influenced the average highschooler to pursue higher education after graduation, despite an array of obstacles in choosing that path.

Liu goes on saying, "members of the PMC soften the sharpness of their guilt about collective suffering by stroking their credentials and telling themselves that they are better and more qualified to lead and guide than other people" (Liu, pp.7) This has direct implications as to why folks tend to go the college-to-career path. The ideology expressed by the PMC is so pervasive in modern culture, TV, media, movies and traditional values, that it's nearly impossible not to internalize. The narrative is clear: If you're not a manager, your job cannot pay well. You can only become a manager by going to a four-year college—if not grad school in addition to. The organized building trades clearly don't fit in this mold because rank and file workers, by definition, are not management.

Why didn't I choose to enter into an apprenticeship in the organized building trades after high school graduation? I grew up in a strong union family where both of my parents were building trade union members. My mother was a steamfitter, the breadwinner in my household and owned two homes by the time I was in 6th grade. I had a positive image of a woman working in a male dominated field—as argued by Kunjufu—in my own home. I often corrected my teachers and peers when comments were made about manual labor being equated to low-paid careers. I was more familiar with the building trades than my highschool college counselor was. The reasons provided by scholars that I recited at the beginning of this essay as to why women, in general, choose the college-to-career path over apprenticeship weren't true in my case.

For me, the problem is linked to prestige and credentialism. There were many times when I filled out legal documents and I was asked of my parents highest level of educational attainment. Despite my mother spending five years in an apprenticeship before she ranked into journey-level, there wasn't a place in the document to note her trade-related education—even though apprenticeship classes are offered through community colleges in most trades. Filling in the circle for 'some college' made me feel embarrassed. I was insecure about how society viewed my mother's credential, although her apprenticeship was a year longer than it takes to earn a Bachelor's degree. The education of her career path was (and still is) invisible on the census, financial aid and other legal documents. The PMC ideology influenced me to believe that my mother's credential was less prestigious than a credential from a 4-year university, despite me seeing the benefits of the high-paying career choice in what she was able to provide for our family.

Upon graduation, I was conflicted and decided to get directly into the workforce. Full disclosure: there were some things that contributed to this decision that aren't within the scope of this essay. I didn't decide to go to community college until I was 22 years old, and I didn't transfer to a four-year college until I was 27 years old. But I chose this path for myself. I thought carefully about the path that I would take, invoking Brown's homoœconomicus to drive my decision to go to college. When it came time for me to transfer from a community college to a four-year, I only applied to UCLA and UCB because of the return on investment. It's important to note that I graduated from undergrad debt-free.

I returned for grad school at Goldman School of Public Policy because of its clout, too. The world-wide name recognition of UCB and its professional schools, in all their tier 1 academic excellence, was seemingly worth going into debt for. However, I find myself clicking to accept loans, influenced by present bias, with no assurance of where I will work that can pay me enough that I will be able to afford the payments on a \$100,000 loan.

### **Policy and Investment Opportunities**

There are many policy levers and investment opportunities that can increase the number of women who choose a career in the organized building trades. All of the stakeholders need to be included into the fold in order to address this shortcoming. The work must include action from middle and highschool teachers and counselors, but also from the building trades councils in addition to legislation being passed by local, state and federal governments.

To start, education of the building trades careers should begin at an early age. When parents, kindergarten and elementary school teachers ask kids what they

want to be when they grow up, there should be exposure to career choices outside of doctors, lawyers, police and firefighters. Tools and Tiaras, Inc. was established in June 2017 with the goal of “exposing girls to hand-on projects in carpentry, electrical, plumbing and automotive through summer camps, conferences and career workshops”. Tools & Tiaras has made a huge impact on the young girls that they have been able to reach. However we need many more organizations like this to make a nationwide impact. Even better, if this approach was implemented as a standard curriculum in elementary, middle and high schools we will likely see an increase of women pursuing a career in the building trades.

Vocational training in middle and high school rose to prominence in the late-1980’s after congress passed the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act (the Act) in 1984 and is now known as Career Technical Education (CTE). CTE programs heavily relied on federal funding that came from the Act, which needed to be renewed by congress every four years. During the 2008 economic recession, millions of Americans were dispossessed of their homes after defaulting on their mortgages in one of the biggest instances of primitive accumulation in my lifetime. Property taxes weren’t collected, and as a result, school district’s cut funding for CTE education as part of a larger austerity plan to balance their budgets.

There has recently been a reassurance of CTE programs which have now expanded into tech-related fields after the Act was renewed in 2018. After a decade of dwindling CTE programs in schools, there is now new funding to expand these programs outside of the traditional woodshop and auto shop classes. Even with federal government funding, these programs are expensive for school districts to maintain. With the rising cost of a 4-year education, federal, state and local

governments need to invest more heavily in other paths that lead to well-paying careers.

CTE instructors are also a key stakeholder in getting more women into building trade careers. While teachers are strapped for time and underpaid, they can make an effort to see that their rosters are balanced. CTE teachers can invite folks from different crafts to speak to the class about the pay and benefits of building trade careers. This would increase the visibility of other trades while the school doesn't have to incorporate another trade into an already constrained CTE budget.

High school counselors are a huge part of this puzzle and they need to be educated on how building trade apprenticeships work. Even when these councilors do know of the build trade career path, they are confused at what is required for an apprenticeship application. When confronted with a senior-itis inflicted soon to be high school graduate that is dead set against spending another minute in class, or someone who doesn't like math; these 'in-the-know' councilors make the mistake of directing these kids into the building trades. The 'earn while you learn' apprentice approach means that you work 40-hour weeks and take two, three-hour classes at night for the duration of apprenticeship, which can last as long as five years. Furthermore, math is a huge part of all skilled trade apprenticeships. High school counselors need to be educated on the career path, and need to stop treating it as an approach that is less work than attending a 4-year college.

The Building Trades Council, a member of the central labor council that also is its own entity, can also do more to bring more excitement about entering into a building trade. They can reach out to middle school and high school CTE instructors and councilors within their jurisdiction to help bridge the information gap.

When it comes to women in the organized building trades there are additional hurdles. All building trades have a culture of hazing that tends to discourage women at a higher rate than it does men. Because the modern day labor movement grew from an exclusionary past, the prohibitive culture of its origin still resonates. Neither the American Federation of Labor (AFL) nor the Congress of Industrial Nations (CIO) allowed women —nor people of color, for that matter—to become members. Both the AFL and the CIO were white mens clubs which sought to create better working conditions for them and them alone. Women had to fight for themselves in the workplace and to become union members.

Despite women working in factories since their inception, it wasn't until nearly year 1900 that the slightly more progressive AFL began to reach out to women as prospective members. As a result, women created their own organization called Women Trade Unions League (WTUL), founded in 1903, which worked to unify working women from all races and classes. This organization was created out of the need to get representation that working women needed, and the organization's efforts were downplayed by AFL leadership as a project that distracted women from formally becoming AFL members. Within one year, the WTUL was in Chicago, New York and Boston. The group disbanded in the wake of the Great Depression, but not before organizing support for many notable women-worker-led strikes such as the garment industry strikes that happened from 1909-1911, and Bread and Roses strike that happened in Lawrence, Massachsettes in 1912. (Britannica, WTUL)

Despite meaningful gains for women in labor throughout the 1900's, the culture of a white-mans club still permeated the culture in the organized building trades, and the concerns of working women were still not being acknowledged by many unions in the now conjoined AFL-CIO. In 1974, the Coalition of Labor Union

Women (CLUW) was founded with the goal of increasing the participation of women within their union. By making themselves heard within their local, working women then could address issues that they were facing regarding the added responsibility of providing reproductive labor inside their home.

Local unions, as well as the national unions, need to do more to change the culture in order to attract and retain more self-identified women in the trades. Many national unions and their locals have begun to address this issue by building a women's caucuses within their local. In 1981, Women of Steel was founded to promote and foster the growth of women in the United Steelworkers Union. Sisters in the Brotherhood was started by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters in 1998 to create a support system for women apprentices and journey-level carpenters. The annual Women Build Nations conference, sponsored by the North American Building Trade Unions, also provides a chance for women from all of the trades to build solidarity in their unique experiences as women in the male-dominated field. The misogynistic culture of the trades is in progress of becoming a thing of the past, but more women need to enter into the trades to ensure continued culture change.

Finally, despite being considered a progressive state, California constitutional amendment 209 prohibits hiring based on any protected classes, including gender. This means that having a mandated quota to encourage contractors to specifically hire women to work from union hall is against state law. Without contractors buy-in, halls will dispatch workers in the order that they signed up on the list. However, many localities have passed local-hiring practices to increase the number of local workers on projects -particularly project labor agreements that are funded by tax-payer dollars. While there needs to be more work to overturn the California state

constitutional amendment, work can be made at the local level to encourage contractors and unions to recruit more women.

All of the aforementioned stakeholders—school districts, teachers, councilors, trade local and national, and building councils, local, state and federal governments—can all do more to ensure that kids see images of people, especially women, working in the building trades. By exposing kids to these images, they can learn to see themselves in these careers as well, which is particularly important for women to see. Then, self-identified women can consider this path as a means to provide for themselves and their families.

Another potential area for government funding goes along with the recent push to expand access to childcare services. We should be advocating for additional funding to go towards early-morning and late-evening childcare centers. This would give mothers options for childcare that can increase their opportunities to join the workforce. Early-morning childcare would especially help mothers who are pursuing a career in the organized building trades since many of these jobs require them to show up to work as early as 5am.

In my view, the biggest challenge to recruiting more women into the organized building trades is combatting the pervasive narratives of the PMC ideology. Credentials do mean something, but not everyone has the privilege of living near a tier 1 university, such as UC Berkeley. This narrative is internalized, and creates a pressure to attend a 4-year college that increases as the cost of education rises. As a society, we need to find a way to remove the prestige that comes with a college degree, while removing the stigma of the credential that comes with a five-year apprenticeship program. Afterall, as Marx explains, we are *all* forced to sell our life activity for sustenance. Our collective life activity is what the economy is composed

of, and all jobs contribute in their own way to keep the economic system working. Single women and married women can be the sole providers of their family in the building trades, but a lot of work needs to be done to resolve historical sexism, demystify building trades, and remove the internalized sexism that contribute to women not pursuing a career in a building trade union.

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