



## **Wider Opportunities for Women**

### **Myths and Facts about Women and Nontraditional Occupations**

**There many myths about whether women can or should work in jobs that are considered non-traditional for them. Here, we dispel some of these common myths about women working in male dominated NTOs with the facts.**

#### **MYTH 1: WOMEN ARE IN THE LABOR FORCE TO EARN SOME EXTRA SPENDING MONEY.**

**FACT:** The majority of women work due to economic need with women and men contributing just about equally in households with children<sup>1</sup>. Two-earner families are more the norm among married couples. In 2006, 69 percent of married mothers were employed outside the home<sup>2</sup>, emphasizing that a majority of American families rely on two incomes.

Single women's particularly urgent need for good jobs is demonstrated by the fact that 38.5 percent of all female headed family households lived in poverty in 2009.

#### **MYTH 2: WOMEN AND MEN ARE REPRESENTED EQUALLY IN MOST OCCUPATIONS.**

**FACT:** Women workers continue to be concentrated in traditionally female occupations. In 2008, women accounted for nearly 39.5 percent of persons employed in management, professional, and related occupations; 33.1 percent of those in sales and office occupations; and 20.6 percent of service occupations. 5.9 percent of employed women worked in production, transportation, and material moving occupations while only .9 percent worked in natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations<sup>4</sup>.

In 2008, women held 96.1 percent of all available secretary and administrative assistant positions, 81.2 percent of all elementary and middle school teaching positions, 88.7 percent of all Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides positions, 75.5 percent of the nation's cashier positions, and 68.3 percent of all available customer service representative positions<sup>5</sup>.

For comparison, in 2008, women only made up 20.9 percent of all computer software engineers, 6.7 percent of all mechanical engineers, 4.9 percent of all Driver/sales workers and truck drivers, 2.5 percent of all general maintenance and repair workers, 1 percent of electricians, 1.5 percent of carpenters, 1.4 percent of Pipe layers, plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters, and only 0.4 percent of all Brick masons, block masons, and stonemasons.

#### **MYTH 3: JOBS IN WHICH WOMEN ARE TRADITIONALLY EMPLOYED PAY SALARIES COMPARABLE TO JOBS IN WHICH MEN ARE TRADITIONALLY EMPLOYED.**

**FACT:** Jobs in which men are traditionally employed typically pay 20 to 30 percent more than traditionally female jobs.

Overall, in 2009 the median weekly earnings of women who were fulltime wage and salary workers was \$657, or 80 percent of men's \$819 due in part to the concentration of women in low wage work<sup>7</sup>.

Data shows that male-dominated jobs pay an average median hourly wage of \$17.35, while the traditionally female-held occupations pay just \$13.85 hourly on average. This translates into a median annual salary of \$36,085 for men and \$28,805 for women – a yearly wage gap of \$7,280.

In 2008, three common traditional jobs for women receptionist, Preschool and kindergarten teachers and home health aide, paid median weekly earnings of \$502, \$589 and \$424 respectively<sup>9</sup>. During the same year, computer programmers, electricians, and Operating engineers and other construction equipment operators,



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jobs predominantly held by men, earned median weekly wages of \$1,261, \$809, and \$744 respectively<sup>10</sup>.

### **MYTH 4: CERTAIN JOBS ARE "MEN'S WORK" AND OTHER JOBS ARE "WOMEN'S WORK."**

**FACT:** Attitudes about which jobs are appropriate for men and which ones are appropriate for women are the result of tradition and socialization. The vast majority of job requirements are unrelated to sex.

### **MYTH 5: BLUE-COLLAR WORK OR HEAVY PHYSICAL LABOR IS NONTRADITIONAL FOR WOMEN.**

**FACT:** Many jobs now thought to be nontraditional for women have been performed by women in the past. Throughout history, women have performed heavy labor on the farm and in the fields alongside men, and during World War II, over 6 million additional women entered the labor force to support the war effort<sup>11</sup>.

### **MYTH 6: WOMEN ARE NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO HANDLE HEAVY LABOR.**

**FACT:** The strength requirements for nontraditional jobs are often exaggerated. Many nontraditional jobs are less physically demanding than housework, and many traditional women's jobs, such as nursing and waitressing, are just as physically demanding as some nontraditional jobs. Moreover, the Occupation Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires that special equipment be provided for every heavy job regardless of whether they are being done by men or women. In addition, mechanization continues to decrease the level of physical demand of many jobs, particularly in the fields of science and engineering. Finally, while the average man is stronger than the average woman, some women are stronger than some men. Women have excellent lower-body strength and with training can develop strong upper-body muscles as well.

### **MYTH 7: NONTRADITIONAL JOBS ARE TOO DIRTY, NOISY AND DANGEROUS FOR WOMEN.**

**FACT:** Nontraditional jobs can be dirty and sometimes dangerous. However, both men and women compare job hazards with the benefits of taking certain jobs. In addition, many traditionally female jobs, like mothering and nursing, are dirty and messy. Many women do not mind getting dirty when they are paid a good wage, and with proper safety instruction, all workers can minimize the danger they experience on the job. Also, many jobs in science and technology are clean jobs that require little physical strength.

### **MYTH 8: A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE HOME, NOT ON A CONSTRUCTION SITE.**

**FACT:** In 2009, women accounted for 46.8 percent of the total labor force and 59.2 percent of all women age 16 and over were labor force participants (working or looking for work). Women are projected to account for 51.2 percent of the increase in total labor force growth between 2008 and 2018.<sup>12</sup> The majority of women work because of economic necessity, and nontraditional jobs better enable women to support themselves and their families.

### **MYTH 9: WOMEN WON'T LIKE TRADE WORK.**

**FACT:** Many women enjoy working with their hands and in the outdoors. They take great pride in knowing they have helped to build or create something. As a result, researchers have found that most tradeswomen have a high degree of job satisfaction.

### **MYTH 10: WOMEN WILL LEAVE A JOB TO GET MARRIED AND HAVE CHILDREN; THEREFORE, THE JOB SHOULD GO TO A MAN WHO WILL STAY.**

**FACT:** In 2009, 71.4% of women in the U.S. with children under 18 participated in the civilian labor force<sup>13</sup>.



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Census data shows that no large differences in employment status between women with children who were at least one year old and women who had no children in the household<sup>14</sup>.

### **MYTH 11: MARRIED WOMEN WHO HAVE HUSBANDS TO SUPPORT THEM SHOULD STAY HOME.**

**FACT:** Many American families are unable to support themselves on a single income. As a result, the proportion of married-couple families with the wife in the paid labor force measured approximately 69 percent<sup>15</sup>. In 18 percent of married couples women earned at least \$5,000 more than their spouse<sup>16</sup>. *Married couple families in which the husband and wife work had far higher median incomes (\$90,299) than married couple families in which the husband worked but the wife did not (\$60,050)*<sup>17</sup>.

### **MYTH 12: WOMEN ON A JOB SITE MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR MEN TO CONCENTRATE.**

**FACT:** It will be different, at first, to have a woman on a work site if an employer has never hired one before. Employers can ensure workers' productivity by telling employees that a qualified woman has been hired and that harassment will not be tolerated. While sexual harassment can happen in any work environment, it can be particularly harsh for women working in nontraditional occupations. The problem that must be stopped is the harassing behavior, not women's entrance into the workplace.

### **MYTH 13: WOMEN DO NOT HAVE THE MECHANICAL OR MATHEMATICAL APTITUDE FOR SKILLED TRADE WORK.**

**FACT:** There is no difference in women's and men's innate skills and potential that justifies existing occupational segregation. Recent research shows that, despite widely held stereotypes, girls perform as well as boys on standardized math tests<sup>18</sup>. Women who themselves hold stereotypes about gender may be less likely to pursue a math-related careers<sup>19</sup>.

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2 Institute for Women's Policy Research. Fact Sheet. *Women and Unemployment Insurance: Outdated Rules Deny Benefits That Workers Need and Have Earned*. IWPR #A132 January 2008 [http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/A132\\_WomenandUI.pdf](http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/A132_WomenandUI.pdf) p 1

3 Webinar on 2009 income, poverty and health insurance estimates from the current population survey September 16, 2010 [http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/doc/2010-09-16\\_remarks\\_johnson.doc](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/doc/2010-09-16_remarks_johnson.doc)

4 U.S. Department of Labor. *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*. Report 1018 September 2009. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook-2009.pdf> table 10

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6 U.S. Department of Labor. *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*. Report 1018. September 2009. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook-2009.pdf> table 11

7 U.S. Department of Labor. Quick Stats on Women Workers, 2009 <http://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/main.htm>

8 National Women's Law Center. *Forging New Pathways: Promising Practices for Recruiting and Retaining Students in Career and Technical Education Programs That Are Nontraditional for Their Gender*. Jun 2005. [http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/Report2005\\_PPTW\\_Final.pdf](http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/Report2005_PPTW_Final.pdf)

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- 11 *Rosie the Riveter: Real Women Workers in World War II*. US Library of Congress. 24 Jun 2005.  
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/journey/rosie-transcript.html>
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<http://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/main.htm>
- 13 U.S. Department of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Economic News Release. Table 5. *Employment status of the population by sex, marital status, and presence and age of own children under 18, 2008-09 annual averages*  
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