

**MYTHS AND FACTS
ABOUT WOMEN
AND NONTRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS**



A publication by Wider Opportunities for Women
Created in 1997
Updated 2006

Wider Opportunities for Women
1001 Connecticut Ave, NW, Ste. 930 Washington, DC 20036
phone: 202.464.1596 fax: 202.464.1660 email: info@WOWonline.org
www.WOWonline.org

Introduction

Work4Women was launched by Wider Opportunities for Women to provide tools, strategies and a virtual community to help increase women and girls' integration and retention in high-wage jobs that are considered nontraditional for women. Nontraditional occupations (NTOs) are jobs in which women comprise 25% or less of the workforce (U.S. Department of Labor).

Work4Women (formally work4women.org) was designed to:

- Interest [women](#) and [girls](#) in training for high-wage, nontraditional occupations
- Help [women working](#) in nontraditional occupations remain and advance in their careers
- Inform [workforce development professionals and educators](#) of effective methods to train, place and support women in nontraditional occupations

Project Funding was provided by the U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau and Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training *Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) Act grant*.

Engaging women in Nontraditional occupations remains a method for women to better achieve self-sufficiency. The materials have been updated and broken down into a variety of useful documents now available on WOW's website www.wowonline.org under National Programs.

Wider Opportunities for Women

Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) is a national organization that has been helping women and their families achieve economic independence and equality of opportunity since 1964.

WOW's intergenerational vision and mission of economic independence for women and girls is met by working nationally and in its home community of Washington, D.C. on policies and programs that promote equality of opportunity for low-income women. WOW has helped women learn to earn, with programs emphasizing literacy, technical and nontraditional skills, welfare-to-work transition, career development, and retirement security. Since its founding, WOW has prepared more than 10,000 women and girls for well-paid work in the D.C. area.

Through our national Family Economic Self-Sufficiency (FESS) Project, we work with thousands of organizations in more than 35 states to design programs and policies that put low-income, working families on the path to economic independence. A cornerstone of that work is the development and implementation of the Self-Sufficiency Standard, a localized measure of how much income it takes for working families to make ends meet without public or private subsidies of any kind.

More recently, WOW has launched the national Elder Economic Security Initiative™ (EESI™) program. The national EESI™ program seeks to build economic security for older adults through a multi-pronged approach that includes organizing, advocacy and research. The national EESI™ program is an initiative to enable policy makers, aging advocates and others develop policies and programs to help seniors age with dignity while promoting their economic security. A key component of the initiative is the Elder Economic Security Standard™ index, a measure of well-being that determines the income and supports needed for older adults to live modestly depending on their health and life circumstances.

Myths and Facts About Women and Nontraditional Occupations

There many myths about whether women can or should work in jobs that are considered nontraditional 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. Nearly 72 percent of mothers with children under 18 years of age work for pay. Two-earner families are increasingly the norm among married couples and a growing number of single women work to provide most or all of their family's support. Altogether, 62 percent of working women responded that they provide half or more of their family's income when asked by the AFL-CIO in their *Working Women Survey 2004*.¹

In 2002, 55 percent of women in the labor force were married, emphasizing that a majority of American families rely on two incomes. That same year, 45 percent of women in the labor force were either single (25 percent), or divorced, widowed, or separated (20 percent).² Single women's particularly urgent need for good jobs is demonstrated by the fact that 28.4 percent of all female-headed family households lived in poverty in 2004.³

- **Myth 2. Women and men are represented equally in most occupations.**

FACT: Women workers continue to be concentrated in traditionally female occupations. In 2005, worked in management, professional, and related occupations contained the largest percentage of employed women (38%), 35% worked in sales and office occupations and 20% in service occupations. Only 6% of employed women worked in production, transportation, and material moving occupations while only 1% worked in natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations.⁴

In 2004, women held 96.7 percent of all available secretary and administrative assistant positions, 96.7 percent of all elementary and middle school teaching positions, 88.3 percent of all home health aide positions, 75 percent of the nation's cashier positions, and 70.1 percent of all available customer service representative positions.⁵

For comparison, in 2005, women only made up 21.0 percent of all computer software engineers, 18.4 percent of all network and computer systems administrators, 5.8 percent of all mechanical engineers, 4.5 percent of all driver/sales workers and truck drivers, 4.1 percent of all general maintenance and repair workers, 2.6 percent of electricians, 1.9 percent of carpenters, 1.2 percent of plumbers/pipe layers, and only 0.9 percent of all brick masons.⁶

¹ *Equal Pay for Working Families: National and State Data 2006*. AFL-CIO 2006.

<http://www.aflcio.org/issues/jobseconomy/women/equalpay/EqualPayForWorkingFamilies.cfm>

² Facts About Working Women. Women Employed 2004.

<http://www.womenemployed.org/docs/Facts%20about%20Working%20Women.pdf>

³ *Persistent Inequalities: Poverty, Lack of Health Coverage, and Wage Gaps Plague Economic Recovery*. Institute for Women's Policy Research. 30 Aug 2005. http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/News_8_30_2005.pdf

⁴ *Quick Stats 2005*. US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005. <http://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/main.htm>

⁵ *20 Leading Occupations of Employed Women Full-Time Wage Salary and Earners, 2004 Annual Averages 2004*.

US Department of Labor Women's Bureau 2004. <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/20lead2004.htm>

⁶ *Nontraditional Occupations for Women in 2005*. US Department of Labor Women's Bureau. Mar 2006. . <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/nontra2005.htm>

- **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 2005 the median weekly earnings of women who were full-time wage and salary workers were \$585, or 81 percent of men's \$722 due in part to the concentration of women in low wage work.⁷

According to 2005 data, the National Women's Law Center found that of the occupations it analyzed, 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 \$7,280.⁸

In 2004, three common traditional jobs for women, secretary, receptionist, and home health aide, paid median weekly earnings of \$550, \$463, and \$383 respectively.⁹ During the same year, computer programmers, electricians, and carpenters, jobs predominantly held by men, earned median weekly wages of \$1118, \$719, and \$576 respectively.¹⁰

- **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 done 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.¹¹

⁷ *Women in the Labor Force 2005*. US Department of Labor Women's Bureau. Nov 2005.

<http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/Qf-laborforce-05.htm>

⁸ *Forging New Pathways: Promising Practices for Recruiting and Retaining Students in Career and Technical Education Programs That Are Nontraditional for Their Gender*. National Women's Law Center. Jun 2005.

http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/Report2005_PPTW_Final.pdf

⁹ *20 Leading Occupations of Employed Women Full-Time Wage Salary and Earners, 2004 Annual Averages 2004*. US Department of Labor Women's Bureau 2004. <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/20lead2004.htm>

¹⁰ *Median Weekly Earnings of Selected Occupations, 2005*. US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0873324.html>

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>

- **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 are often dirty and sometimes dangerous. However, both men and women must compare the hazards with the benefits of taking certain jobs. In addition, many traditionally female jobs, like mothering and nursing, are dirty and messy. Some also have health hazards, such as computer terminal radiation and carpal tunnel syndrome. 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 2005, women accounted for 46 percent of the total labor force and nearly two thirds of all women age 16 and over were labor force participants (working or looking for work). Women are projected to account for 51 percent of the increase in total labor force growth between 2004 and 2014.¹² 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 that 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.**

In 2004, 70.4% of women in the U.S. with children under 18 participated in the civilian labor force.¹³

¹² *Women in the Labor Force 2005*. US Department of Labor Women's Bureau. Nov 2005.

<http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/Qf-laborforce-05.htm>

¹³ *Employment Status of Population by Sex, Marital Status, and Presence of Own Children Under 18, 2004-2005 Annual Averages*. US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. 27 Apr 2006.

<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.t05.htm>

- **Myth 11. Married women who have husbands to support them should stay home and leave the good paying jobs for men.**

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 57.8% in 2005.¹⁴ In 2003, women earned more than their husbands in 32.4 percent of these dual earner households thereby contributing crucial income to the household.¹⁵

In 2004, the median income for married-couple families with both husband and wife in the labor force was \$79,983, compared to \$52,094 for those without the wife in the paid labor force.¹⁶ According to the U.S. Department of Labor, even if all the employed married women gave their jobs to unemployed men, there would still be 1.2 million unfilled jobs.

- **Myth 12. Women on a job site make it difficult for men to concentrate; they are too distracting.**

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 will lose their femininity if they work in a trade.**

FACT: Women can encounter offensive language anywhere, not just on the job site. While women need to be physically prepared for nontraditional jobs, there is nothing unfeminine about being physically fit. Many women find that earning the good wages that nontraditional jobs pay enables them to buy the things that make them feel feminine, like nice clothes and cosmetics.

- **Myth 14. 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. A study conducted by the Johnson O'Conner Research Foundation Human Engineering Laboratory found no difference attributable to sex in 14 of 22 aptitude tests given to men and women. In the eight remaining tests, women excelled in six tests and men scored higher in two.

¹⁴ "Employment in Married Couple Families." *Monthly Labor Review*. 28 Apr 2006. US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2006/apr/wk4/art05.htm>

¹⁵ "Table 25. Wives Who Earn More than Their Husbands, 1987-2003." *Current Population Survey*. 2005. US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-table25-2005.pdf>

¹⁶ "Historical Income Tables-Families." *Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements*. 20 Dec 2005. US Census Bureau. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/f13ar.html>