

# THESE WOMEN BUILD BOSTON AND ARE RECRUITING MORE TO JOIN THEM

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Nearly 40 years after President Jimmy Carter signed an executive order mandating women hold 6.9% of work hours on construction projects receiving federal funds, the number still hovers between 2% and 3% nationally.

No state has come close to his aspirational rate until Massachusetts began to see a rise in women joining the industry in the last five years.



“Something is happening where, after decades of no progress, we’re beginning to see an increase in women in construction,” said Elizabeth Skidmore, business representative/organizer at the New England Regional Council of Carpenters and co-founder of the Policy Group on Tradeswomen’s Issues.

Women in construction apprentice programs in Massachusetts leaped from 180 in 2012 (4.2% of all active apprentices) to 473 (6.9%) in 2016.

That has been the mission statement of PGTI, which Skidmore co-founded in 2008 after realizing there was a not enough of a push to find women consistent employment in the industry after training. PGTI, which counts a blend of tradeswomen, unions and representatives in government among its members, set out to get more women into apprentice programs, which brought union wages and benefits, and find lucrative construction jobs through collaboration.

“We thought, can we get off this hamster wheel and actually make change?”

Skidmore said.

The organization works with project owners to meet and expand hiring goals. It has found a particularly receptive work environment with universities and the Massachusetts Gaming Commission. While Boston has never satisfied a 1984 city ordinance pushing for 10% of city construction jobs to be filled by women, Skidmore said the University of Massachusetts Boston met the goal on the first day of construction at its new Integrated Sciences Complex, which had **10% of its project hours** completed by women and 29% of its project hours completed by minorities.

The MGC has pushed heavily for female involvement on the \$2.4B Wynn Boston Harbor casino in Everett, Mass. The state's gaming organization has fronted half the money for an ad campaign targeting women of color to join trade groups on the mammoth casino project just north of Boston.

“Wynn is truly dedicated to diversity. They get it,” Suffolk compliance officer Shelley Webster said.



Suffolk is constructing the casino, and Webster is dedicated to ensuring minority and female involvement in the project. She also has 35 years of construction experience as an owner of her own construction firm as well as working for her father's company, which did underground utility work on **the Big Dig**. She likes where the construction industry is going, and anticipates PGTI will have no problem reaching its goal of 20% female participation by 2020 as opposed to the limited involvement of women in the industry when she began.

“When I came on, I was told a job site wasn't for a woman. Now it isn't that,” she said. “It's not just breaking the glass ceiling. We have to be willing to kick the door down.”

Webster said there is still a small misogynistic element in construction, but the industry is populated by more who recognize women can add value to a team when given an opportunity. Suffolk now offers a Suffolk Women's Network that meets each month in offices around the country and works to

attain more leadership roles for women in the company. Skidmore also sees a positive response from her trade.

“The carpenters union has been instrumental in our success by being receptive to women and saying, ‘If you want us, we want you,’” she said.

Women well-versed in the industry see a lot of reasons why other women should get involved in construction. Skidmore points to its relatively minor gender pay gap (women earn 93% of what men make in union construction jobs as opposed to 80% on average in other jobs) and union benefits like health insurance, paid maternity leave and a 401(k) as driving motivation to join construction. Others say the sheer pride that comes from building spurred them to enter the industry.



**Lisa Wexler** has run her family’s **Elaine Construction Co.** since 2007. Known for its work on **Harvard**’s Holyoke Center and the **MIT** Student Center, Elaine was recognized last year by the Boston Globe as one of the top 100 women-led businesses in Massachusetts. While she stressed the need for a strong work ethic to enter into a business she said is both complex and filled with real problems, Wexler is impressed with the progress made since she began working and said the tangible results of hard work are an important benefit to the job.

“Unless you were a secretary, there was no role for you in this industry,” Wexler said. “Now there’s a whole field.”

With Boston’s building boom leading to a spike in available jobs, Skidmore said she is impressed that both the numbers and percentages of females involved rose and said her group’s hard work at recruiting and educating women is partly responsible. The Minnesota Tradeswomen organization was impressed by PGTI’s results and flew Skidmore out to talk to them, as they want to copy the model.

“Any developer with a social justice perspective should take note,” she said. “It’s one thing to build a beautiful building, but this is how you also build a community at no extra cost. It’s a beautiful thing.”



While Skidmore's group charges toward 2020 with its 20% female involvement goal at the forefront, Wexler has another idea as to what will make her feel as though her mission is complete.

“We'll know our mission is accomplished when little girls can find Bob the Builder and also Brenda the Builder,” she said.

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