Mayor Targets Women To Fill Void in Construction Market

By DANIELA GERSON
Staff Reporter of the Sun

She is a 21st-century take on Rosie the Riveter.

"We're looking for a few good women," posters Mayor Bloomberg's office has plastered around the city proclaim. A muscular black woman donning a hardhat turned backwards and gripping a crowbar is the new poster-woman advertising jobs in carpentry, electricity, plumbing, and painting. The ads tout: "The average salary in the construction trades is $53,000."

With a construction boom, the city needs a new influx of labor, Mr. Bloomberg said. Women are being sought to fill the void.

The publicity campaign, launched in early November, is the first of a host of initiatives Mr. Bloomberg's new Commission on Construction Opportunity plans to encourage and prepare minorities, women, and returning veterans to work construction jobs.

About 3% of the nation's construction workers are women, less than half the stated minimum federal goal of 6.9%. In New York City, 1,500 women are in the construction trades, according to the executive director of Nontraditional Employment for Women, Anne Rascón. Most of those women, she said, went through her organization's training programs, which the mayor's new posters are promoting.

"The construction industry will have to tap into emergent labor pools," Ms. Rascón said. "And the pool for women has been largely been untapped."

Ms. Rascón is convinced it's a question of women being aware of the opportunity to work in the construction industry: In the month since the posters have hit all five boroughs inquiries have increased 400%.

Eleven years ago, one of NEW's sessions transformed Tamara Rivera from a Wall Street receptionist to a carpenter. Yesterday she was back at the Chelsea headquarters helping with a construction project and providing pointers to a new class of women who were finishing up their last week of training with lessons on cutting and carrying sheet metal.

Female carpenters have increased slightly, she said, in 11 years on the job, but usually she is alone on a job. Each time she has to prove being a woman does not make her a worse carpenter.

"Right away as soon as you get on the job site they challenge you because you are a woman," she said. Bathrooms are often an issue, and an all too familiar question is, "You're such a pretty girl, why do you want to this — meanwhile, can we have a date?"

When she graduated, three other women also joined Local 608. Ms. Rivera, who wore a T-shirt with "A Woman's Place Is in Her Union" scripted across it, was the only one who stuck it out. "It's not easy," she said. "They're not sure a woman can handle the job."

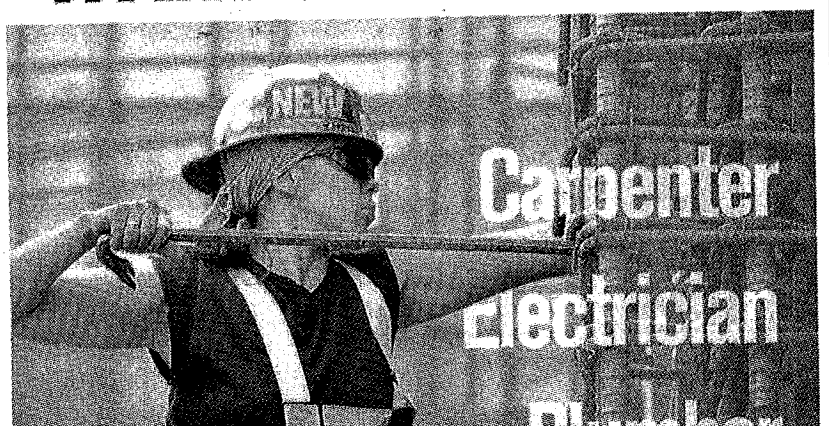
Challenges notwithstanding, she wouldn't change jobs for the world. The financial freedom, satisfaction of mastering a skill, and opportunity to do work she loves more than make up for them. "It's not just a man's job anymore ... we do it really well," she said. "I would tell anybody to be a carpenter."

The eager women in the class looked to Ms. Rivera as an inspiration yesterday. Mostly black and Hispanic women, some were just starting out on careers, some were on public assistance, and others were looking for a change.

When Ms. Rivera asked for volunteers to help carry some metal objects yesterday morning, Shantee Roberts's was the first hand to shoot up. A part-time food vendor at Madison Square Garden and a former college basketball player, Ms. Roberts, 24, now wants to become a carpenter.

An ad in the Village Voice brought her to the program. "I got the last seat," she said. "This is going to change my life. I know it." For the first time in her life, she said, "I'm looking forward to Mondays."

When she graduates at the end of this week she plans to join laborers and then the carpentry union. With the money from this career, "I can buy a house, put down a mortgage, send my kids to private school. You have financial security," the Brooklyn native predicted. "If you're a hardworking person and not afraid to get dirty, this is the job for you."



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