



**EQUALITY WORKS**  
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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE WOMEN'S ISSUES COMMITTEE OF THE  
NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL**

**September 20, 2007**

Hearing: **Are There Enough Non-Traditional Employment Opportunity for  
Women in New York City?**

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I am pleased to have this opportunity to address the Women's Issues Committee on non-traditional employment opportunity for women in New York City. My name is Veronica Session and I am a carpenter in Local 926. I have been a carpenter for eighteen (18) years. I became a carpenter after working as an Operations Manager for the Bank of Boston for ten (10) years. In 1989, I, like many other young women my age, at that time, thought that the only way to make a decent living was to have a desk job in a corporation. After 10 years I had no money to show for my efforts and there was no job satisfaction. I was forced to re-evaluate my life and accept the fact I was not happy with my career even though it was a nice bank and I had a clean desk. I decided then that a career change was necessary and because I was still young I knew I could successfully make the transition into a physically demanding field. I knew that I liked being outdoors and that I liked working with my hands to create a tangible product rather than being cooped up behind a Plexiglas cage. Upon reflection I believe I was instinctively drawn to the carpentry trade and knew I would be good at it.

In the beginning it was very difficult joining the carpenters union because I did not know anyone who could tell me what steps I needed to take to become a carpenter. I would visit sites and ask for work. This took me about two (2) years, going from site to site looking for a job, with my high school transcript in my bag, because my experience in banking was irrelevant. I was fortunate to meet a foreman who did not see my gender as a liability but saw me as an asset. This foreman was my first mentor. He decided to let me work on his site for one week so he could evaluate my aptitude for the trades. He taught me the initial skills that made me eligible to enter the carpenter's union.

My journey in the trades has not been easy, many times I was unemployed while my male colleagues enjoyed long periods of continuous employment. These men were also offered overtime while women were excluded from this opportunity. In the early stages of my career I always had to prove myself. I went to work every day knowing that my male colleagues and supervisors did not believe I was capable of doing the job. The work environment was the most hostile imaginable, not only because of the attitude of the men I worked with but also because I had to work with tools and accessories that were designed for men. Recently a tradeswomen's advocate observed several tiny scar markings on the back of my hands and asked how these were acquired. I explained that the lack of proper equipment had forced me in the early days of my career to do my job without safety gloves because the assigned gloves were too difficult to maneuver. This might seem a small matter but it could easily deter many women from joining the trades because of the obvious physical damage they could do to their body. I want to emphasize that a lack of proper safety equipment is still a major problem for tradeswomen. Ill-fitting gloves are a small part of this problem. Many tradeswomen today still have to use tools that were designed for men who tend to have bigger hands. The inability to grip and maneuver a tool properly can lead to serious injury. Tradeswomen like myself, punish our bodies daily using tools and materials designed for men while in a hostile working environment.

Today I have a challenging and rewarding career that has allowed me to live at a certain quality of life with the financial freedom to pursue my hobbies and other interests. I have no regrets about joining the trades but I wish my journey had been easier and I

hope it will be easier for women who join today. As a journey level carpenter I have acquired the skills of framing, woodworking, sheetrock, hardware, concrete and ceilings. I am also a shop steward, looking out for the carpentry crew as the eyes and ears of the union on construction sites. I am also a Steering Committee member of the Women's Committee of the New York City District Council of Carpenters' Education Committee and a co-leader of the Habitat for Humanity Women Carpenters. My work with Habitat for Humanity includes coordinating teams of women carpenters to work on projects including rebuilding homes for families in need. I also organize my fellow carpenters to attend both middle and high school career day fairs as speakers and presenters. I am most proud of my interaction with the students, because many girls did not know that women did this kind of work. I often sense their excitement because I am proof of what can be accomplished and that there are no jobs exclusively for their male counterparts.

Today so much emphasis is being placed on leaving "no child behind" but I am worried that we are shortchanging our girls by not exposing them to the careers in the trades. Women are 50% of the population and they should have access to exciting careers in the trades that pay higher than the stereotypical desk job that so many young girls will rush into after high school because they do not know better. The trades pay significantly higher wages than most entry-level office jobs. Women need to have access to this source of financial security. Women's economic empowerment is important because it helps to lift families out of poverty. I have met women who have escaped domestic violence because of the economic security they acquired with a high paying job in the trades.

There is a lot of work to be done in the city and women should be fully included in this opportunity. I have been around long enough to hear promises of a better tomorrow. I think we need to make it better for women today or we will not be able to secure our families tomorrow.