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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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OPL is an independent voice for tradeswomen that receives administrative support from Legal Momentum. The views and actions of this group do not necessarily represent those of Legal Momentum.

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I am pleased to have this opportunity to address the Women's Issues Committee of The New York City Council on non-traditional employment opportunities for women in New York City. My name is Leah Rambo: I began my career as a sheet metal worker and member of Local 28 in February of 1988.

Unlike many tradeswomen who dabbled in stereotypical desk jobs before joining the trades, I was fortunate to come to my first love right out of high school. I went to Brooklyn Technical High School, an engineering high school in New York City. I majored in electrical engineering and electronics. In my senior year I did an internship as an electrician's helper and the experience convinced me that my preference was working with my hands and seeing my final product.

However, knowing what one wants to do right after high school does not always mean one has access to their dream job. Immediately after graduating high school, I tried to enter Local 3, the Electricians union. After being rejected several times, I went to Non Traditional employment for Women (NEW) to see if they could help me. Unfortunately I was too young to join their program. As I was leaving the building I met a woman who was a Sheet Metal worker and she told me I should consider Local 28. I had no idea what Sheet metal was but she said it was fun and that was enough to convince me to try it. The Union was pursuing recruitment efforts to increase the amount of minorities in the Local and I immediately seized the opportunity and applied to Local 28.

After completing a four-year apprenticeship I became a journeywoman in 1992. Much of my early success was largely due to the fact that I was assigned to work with mechanics that were willing to teach me during my apprenticeship. I learned all aspects of the trade and have worked in a HVAC and radiator enclosure shop. Since becoming a journey woman I have worked in the field installing ducts and I have also run work as a foreman. Shortly after becoming a mechanic I served on the apprentice advisory council. My creative instincts were fulfilled doing estimating and sketching which is part of duct design. Until recently, I worked at the apprentice training facility as an instructor. I am the first female and second minority to hold this position.

From my experience I would say that the main problem for women's retention in the trades is the general feeling that women do not belong in construction. There are many negative myths and stereotypes surrounding women in the construction trades. It is very similar to the negative stereotypes that fostered prejudice and discrimination that kept Blacks and Latinos out of the construction industry for many years. In one of my early experiences, a foreman who tried to lay me off freely stated in my presence "we already have a girl". This foreman, in an effort to justify his actions, lied about the quality of my work even though he had never seen my work. I was fortunate that another foreman on the job who had seen my work vouched for me to the owner of the company. I was not laid off that time - but there have been occasions when I knew that I had lost a job primarily because of my gender. My experience is not unique, several other tradeswomen in my Local have shared numerous stories of similar occurrences.

The fact that women are more likely to be laid off results in lower earnings compared to our male counterparts. Women are not able to maintain their union benefits because of the great disparity in work hours. Eventually many women leave the trades to seek jobs which give them greater financial security and where they will be treated more fairly, while being paid less.

It is my opinion that gender harassment and discrimination is the number one reason women leave the trades. Most of time the harassment is sexual in nature and this makes for a hostile work environment. Some men deliberately bait women on site by making off color sexual jokes and comments, and can make a woman feel uncomfortable. Often the comments are very degrading and disrespectful. Pornography is everywhere on site. It can be found in the gang boxes, shanties, bathrooms, any standing wall and even on equipment. It is difficult for a General Contractor, shop steward and foreman to say they did not see any pornography because it is everywhere. However, few will do or say anything about it being on site. Women are either forced to ignore it and say nothing or be the “bad guy” and speak up. I think very few men would be able to work productively in an environment where pictures of nude men in various positions were considered acceptable and prevalent.

If a woman is brave enough to speak out against the pornography she will be alienated from the work team or transferred to another site. More often she will suffer a worse fate and will be laid off with no explanation. A few men will remove the offensive pictures when they know a woman is coming to the job. However, this action is not

without problems because the other guys who want the pictures up already label you a problem. When she gets to the site those men are annoyed and angry because if she had not come to the job they could keep their pictures. Unfortunately many General Contractors are not supportive because they just want to keep the “Men” happy so the job gets done. They may say “keep your pictures in the gang boxes don’t let me see them”. So the gang boxes are closed when the GC is around and opened when they leave. If a General Contractor stated that pornography was not acceptable at work and that anyone with it would be fined and not allowed to return to the job that would solve 90% of the problem. We really need to start looking at this hostile work environment as a safety issue the same as we would an OSHA violation. I have met more than a few men who agree that pornography does not belong in the workplace but they too are scared to speak out for fear of being harassed themselves.

The hostile work environment only gets worse when women are isolated on a site. This isolation is easily achieved because there are so few women in the trades. On many sites there is only one female hired. When a woman is alone she has no one to share her experience with and fears complaining since she will be seen as the troublemaker who does not play well with the team.

The physical work environment also deters a lot of women from staying in the trades. On many sites women do not have a designated private place to change their clothes. Even worse there are no clean bathrooms and when there is a port-a- potty, it rarely has a secure lock to ensure privacy.

The most frustrating part is that the discrimination does not end. With almost twenty years experience in just about any other field, a person would acquire a certain amount of respect. This is not true for many journey level tradeswomen who still have to go to each site proving that again and again that she can do the work and that she does belong there. Women's work is constantly monitored or unfairly criticized. In general you are expected to perform at a higher standard than your male counterparts. When a woman makes a mistake she usually loses her job, when the same mistake is made by a man it is overlooked and excused. In general women are required to work at a higher standard and often under different rules. Women who outperform their male colleagues get little recognition and their efforts often go unnoticed while a less qualified man is given a position of responsibility. I have experienced this form of discrimination more than any other form throughout my career.

In my union there are less than one hundred (100) women out of about three thousand (3000) members. Efforts are being made to recruit and retain minorities but women often ignored. Less than half the total women in the union are working and I have not met one who has not experienced some form of discrimination. Most unions often do not send or push for women to be included on a site. More needs to be done to actively recruit women and seek out ways to keep them.

Contractors must do their part also and train their employees, as to what is acceptable and unacceptable workplace behavior. If they set the standard and stick by it, workers will fall in line. They shoulder the bulk of the responsibility regarding what they

allow to happen in their companies. The Forman only has as much power as the owner gives him.

The Recent Women Re:Build NY Conference produced by Legal Momentum brought all of the construction industry together for a frank discussion on how to improve access to women. I was proud to speak on behalf of tradeswomen. The future is still cloudy for women in the building trades; we need more decision makers committed to making things better for women. The Re:Build Conference has renewed some of my hopes that women will be given a fair deal.

I think it is too easy to ignore the plight of women in our industry. Many in the industry want to convince themselves that women really do not want these jobs and that it is really a man's work. I think this is foolish and bad for business. The building boom in New York should be a signal that we cannot afford to discriminate against anyone who is capable and willing to do the work.

The President and Business Manager of the Sheet Metal workers, Michael Belluzzi has shown his commitment to ensuring that all members are treated fairly. My Union gave me the opportunity to enroll at Cornell in their Diversity Program and develop a curriculum entitled "Respect for Workforce Diversity". This course concentrates primarily on identifying and preventing all types of discrimination in the workplace. It does this with some instructor presentations, class discussions, video presentations on discrimination and sexual harassment, handouts and self-analysis of

personal prejudices. The program also does a review of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, EEOC Guidelines and Local 28 Policy and Contract Agreement Regarding Discrimination and Harassment. This ongoing three-part educational course begins in the first year of the apprenticeship and ends in the third. This type of training is important for apprentices and all of the industry and it can help to prevent lawsuits and increase productivity in the workplace.

There certainly have been challenges in choosing a nontraditional career but I do not regret my choice nor would I trade my experience. I currently have a niece in the trade with me. My employment as a Union Sheet Metal Worker afforded me the opportunity to purchase my first home as a single person in my early twenties, travel the world and enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. There is a certain amount of pride that goes with knowing that you have had a part in building this great city. A city that we must never forget became great because of its ability to accept, respect, and therefore blossom from its diversity.