

WOMEN ON THE JOB

Conference Seeks to Remove Barriers For Women in the Construction Industry

Leah Rambo, a sheet metal worker and teacher of apprenticeship programs, knows firsthand the challenges women face working in the construction industry. She cited the lack of respect shown for women workers, as well as a shortage of changing facilities.

There is such a need for construction workers, however, that leaders in the industry, government, business and education came together for a two-day meeting, April 24-25, to examine the issues affecting the recruitment, training, and retention of skilled tradeswomen from the tri-state region.

"This unprecedented building boom in the tri-state region, particularly in lower Manhattan, provides an excellent opportunity to enlist qualified applicants to fill over 7,000 construction jobs," said Kathy Rodgers, president of Legal Momentum, which organized the conference. "Our goal is to develop a framework of guidelines that can be effectively implemented and replicated so that we ensure a diverse workforce that is

representative of the city's population." Founded in 1970 as NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, Legal Momentum has employed cutting edge legal, legislative and educational strategies to secure equality and justice for women. The group now has the construction industry in its sights.



One full day was devoted to education and apprenticeship. Participants reviewed apprenticeship guidelines and explored how to connect women with existing opportunities. The spotlight was then turned to the on-site culture of the workplace, which has traditionally been dominated by men, and how best to encourage behavior

and work ethics that incorporate the growing, diverse body of workers.

Not lost on those campaigning for women is that construction jobs pay well.

Louis Coletti, President, Building Trades Employers' Association, noted that a union journey-person can earn \$50,000 a year, with health benefits and a pension. "Not everyone can go to college, so construction jobs help to strengthen the middle-class," Coletti said. He also chairs Construction Skills 2000, a program to recruit high school graduates.

Yvette Dennis of the Darman Group spoke about the importance of monitoring all workers on the jobsite and dealing with issues that come up promptly so that women will not be held back.

Sonya Covington related Forest City Ratner's success with the New York Times building, which was named a "Best Practices," building by Legal Momentum. "The company eagerly looks forward to applying similar strategies on its upcoming projects," said Covington, who is Forest City Ratner's assistant vice president of commercial development.

Women advocacy groups and women



"pioneers" in construction were on hand to encourage groups of young apprentices who attended the conference.

"From the women's suffrage movement to the present, women have strived to build, create, and construct an identity that's contrary to the male-dominated definitions of womanhood," said Cheryl Farrell, a tradeswoman with Electrician Local 3. She pointed out that her ability to balance work and family now make her an important asset to the city's construction industry. "Today's skilled tradeswomen are capable of constructing and managing any project with the same efficiency that they have derived from their experiences."

The second day of the conference included a discussion among government leaders, such as Comptroller William Thompson and Speaker of the New York City Council Christine Quinn.

Legal Momentum is spearheading the effort to institute change and monitor the enforcement of existing laws and regulations. The group will generate a report with the recommendations from this conference so that system-wide policies can be implemented. For more information, go to www.legalmomentum.org.