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COLLECTIVE

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featuring
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WOMEN WORKFORCE

With female electrical tradies earning on average 86% more than men, it's time to ditch the notion that men rule the worksite. We talk to three women in the industry on the challenges – and their overwhelming success.

WORDS Jennifer Johnston

Back in 1998, Susan Eisenberg, an electrician in Boston for 15 years, compiled a collection of interviews with female tradespeople across the US and released *We'll Call You If We Need You: Experiences of Women Working in Construction*. Now a poet, lecturer and employment equity activist, Susan urges more women to consider work as a tradesperson.

“Many women have found careers in construction that are both satisfying and well-paid. Unfortunately, systemic discrimination persists, and most women – through no fault of their own – have not,” says Susan. “If you’re drawn to this work and believe you’re capable, don’t settle. If things aren’t working out, speak up and if necessary, leave that employer for one who values what you bring and provides the support and fair treatment needed by anyone to succeed.”

These women who have done just that.



Rachel Turner
Founder, Front Porch Properties

I'm actually a classically trained pianist. I trained at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Brisbane, completing a degree in classical piano performance in 2005. I managed my own music business for 10 years, but I've always had a passion for construction, building design and architecture. When I was little I was always drawing plans, so design has been in my heart forever. A few years ago I began dabbling in the residential construction industry. I started by researching the real estate market in Brisbane, attending house auctions, buying a few houses and renovating them to sell. I found my passion.

At the same time I also observed the demand for more females in the residential construction industry. There was an opportunity to create a niche in the market where I could apply my design flair, but also use my construction knowledge. In February 2014 I created Front Porch Properties.

Trying to stand my ground as a female working in a predominantly male-dominated industry has its challenges. In the beginning, I was having to regularly prove my worth and knowledge. There were instances of people palming off issues and trying to blame them on me. Being the token female on site, maybe I appeared to be the weakest link – but I know my feminine side is a considerable strength. Women have a different vision and capacity compared to blokes. I'm also a good communicator, which is important when connecting and talking to the tradies.

Part of my vision for Front Porch Properties is to inspire others to live their dreams. If you have a dream, be fearless in your pursuit of it. Take risks and back yourself; if you're passionate about something, then you're probably naturally very good at it. Learn to make the voice inside your head louder than all the other voices. Find a way to make your vocation your vacation, then you will never work another day in your life. It doesn't have to be through conventional methods either – when I started, I had no idea how to build houses, so I just dived in and learnt on the way.

My job is stressful but I absolutely love it. I turn the stress into a positive because of my passion for design and style. I would love to be seen as someone who encourages more women to work in the construction industry, especially to be a mentor for females who pursue their dreams.



Help a Lady Out

When Wendy Pinch wanted to help people find female tradies for free and to also create an environment that helps these tradies connect with mentors, she founded The Lady Tradies Australia website.

“In the current Australian school system, girls are told they can do anything, including taking on a trade. They confidently sign up for an apprenticeship, but when entering the educational institutions and work on site, they feel lost as they're still out-numbered by males,” says Wendy. “These girls have to know society wants them and there definitely is a career path as carpenter, plumber or an electrician for them if that's what they want to be.”

theladytradies.com.au

Olivia Boyd
Electrician, Sole Trader

After leaving school in Year 11, with no idea what to do with myself, I began an electrical apprenticeship with my father, an industrial electrician who works on the Newcastle wharfs.

Dad was ready to retire when I started my apprenticeship, so he mostly stayed in the office, leaving me to my own devices. Dad protected me in my first year and in my second year I worked with another fellow who also protected me from the challenges women face in this type of industry. It wasn't until I moved to Port Headland, Western Australia, for a job opportunity that I encountered problems.

Working with [a port authority] as the High Voltage Plant Electrical Maintainer, 18 months into the job, I experienced a couple of serious sexual harassment issues; what I refer to as the dark side of construction. Without support or advice from anyone, I was pushed out of my job.

Feeling a little broken, I returned home to Newcastle to re-group. A few months later, I returned to Western Australia to a fly-in-fly-out role at a mining construction site in Perth.

For the last two years I've been working in Newcastle as a sole trader electrician doing mostly domestic and commercial work. My husband is a domestic builder and I sub-contract to him and to an industrial electrician I worked for in the last year of my apprenticeship.

My advice to other women is don't be afraid to enter the industry. Working on a construction site involves working with males of all ages. Sometimes they talk about inappropriate things. Mostly I just roll with the punches and try and laugh it off. But if it gets personal, that's when it gets hard. Now that I've been dealing with it for 10 years it doesn't seem to bother me.

I suggest to anyone considering working in this industry to be honest with people and listen to what they want. Figure out your niche and find someone to work with you one-on-one who can be your mentor. Try to work at a company with rules to protect you. Looking back on the Port Headland situation, I realise I was a young, sheltered 22-year-old who could have better dealt with the issues. I wished I was a little stronger back then and had not been afraid to speak up. As a young 17-year-old, I didn't actually want to be an electrician, but now at 27 I wouldn't want to be doing anything else.

Natasha Wells
Construction Manager, Cockram Constructions

At high school I studied a mix of science, maths and arts subjects. One of my high school teachers recognised my natural ability in maths and physics and was the driving force behind me studying engineering (it wasn't until many years later I realised he was my first mentor). I was the first in my family to enter into engineering and construction. I graduated in 1996 and in my engineering class of around 200, I was one of only approximately 10 other women.

My first role was as a site engineer with Concrete Constructions (later rebranded as Walter Construction). My initial project was the design and construction of the Ipswich Hospital redevelopment. A major refurbishment and new build, the project required me to understand the space, what was needed and how much that impacted on the client and patient care. The pure construction and the build is exciting, but what I really enjoy about construction is the client involvement and the use of the building space.

About six years ago, I was hired by one of the directors of Cockram Construction. My role is Queensland Construction Manager and I manage projects around the state, overseeing, guiding and supporting our project managers and project delivery teams.

Over the last 20 years I've observed a definite change in the Industry, which has been positive for women. I've recently accepted a co-chairing position with NAWIC (National Association of Women in Construction.)

When I was younger I received valuable advice on how to progress in my chosen career: know as much as you can about the project by studying the details, the drawings, the contract and the specifications. Basically know more than anyone else. In meetings where I was often the youngest, I knew the detail and would talk through the scope of works. Having the answers to any issues gained respect from my colleagues.

My advice for anyone considering entering the construction industry is to follow your passion. If you are passionate and driven by something, you will work around any challenges and connect with the right people. Be confident, have the knowledge to back yourself up, be transparent and open. Create networks and always have a thirst for knowledge. Whether it's a trade, entry-level or management, really understand what drives and motivates you. Find a good mentor and as you develop in your career, become a mentor and give back. Never forget, as a woman you are a