

Personal Reflection by Shelia Standard - WOPSAT

I have been a tradeswomen for 14 years. Before that I was a science teacher and before that I was a biochemist. I left biochemistry because I didn't manage to write up my PhD. I wasn't stupid, I got a first, but my supervisor kept me working at the bench until a week after I was due to start my post doc. I blame him, not unfairly I think, but I have no regrets. Biochemistry at that time was obsessed with genetic manipulation, and full of male egos who were "full of bull s****" as they say about themselves. My professor boasted that he would never have a female member of staff, even though women students consistently did better than the men. In my post doc I joined forces with the female technicians. We got drunk one Christmas and they dared me to tear up the pornographic calendar that their male boss had on the wall. I did so (there was only a week left) and was caught in the act and physically assaulted by their boss. My boss sent him a new porno calendar to make peace, and put on it "With Love from Sheila." This was 1982.

I became a science teacher and found that I enjoyed working with disowned, disaffected teenagers. I think, being a product of a poor single parent family, gave me less of a patronising empathy than most. I enjoyed doing practical REAL projects with the kids. We had a small farm on the school (inner city) and together we built a stables unit. However whenever I needed assistance, I would have to ask my male colleague, who would come along and redo what we had just done. At the end of the project he put a plaque up saying that the stables had been built by my class. We pinned a notice on it which read "The stables that Andy Built". I gave my notice in after a series of events that made me realise that the management had no concern for animal welfare, health and Safety, nor listening to staff. Whilst applying for jobs, I whiled away the time doing up the house of a friend and putting her in a kitchen. I loved it, and when offered similar work took it with enthusiasm.

Since then I have never had to apply for a job, being fully occupied as a self employed joiner and decorator. About 3 years in I got offered the contract for shop fitting the "Bike Doctors", a bike shop in Manchester. A decorator called Helen who I had just started working with wanted to help so I thrust a saw into her hand and she was away!! This made me start thinking about what women were missing out on. I had heard that back in the Middle Ages that there were lots of women carpenters, but they had been forced out when men started organizing into craftsmen's Guilds. Women who continued to ply their trade would have their tools stolen, and their work vandalised. What a terrible injustice. What a terrible crime, that has never been acknowledged or put right.

I thought that I was the only woman joiner in Manchester but then I came across two women Lorraine and Kath who are Furniture makers. I started to work with them and wrote an article for Diva about them and their work. I loved it. I was introduced to recycled wood, the politics of managing forestation, and using native timber in furniture making. Just about the time I went into a fulltime partnership in The furniture Workshop, I was asked by Adult ed. to start teaching Women's DIY, and found myself teaching a wonderful group of women. Thirsty for knowledge and skill. But the school workshop I was teaching them in was only equipped to teach woodworking. I wanted to teach basic plumbing, electrics, plastering, bricklaying, decorating etc.... The venue was crap, and the resources inadequate. What we needed was our own fully equipped workshop.

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The chance came a year later. I was asked to teach on a women's taster in trades course, but they were short of a place to work on. I had already been talking to the workers at the Pankhurst Centre about the possibility of setting up a DIY teaching workshop, so the women on the taster course set it up for us. Myself and another tradeswoman Carol Hubbard then asked the CITB to fund a promotion; we had in mind to set up a Manchester branch of Women in Manual Trades. What came out was WOPSAT, "Women for Practical Skills and Training", an organisation that has developed the workshop and encouraged other women to teach. Working in partnership we have extended the practical courses to metalwork, bicycle maintenance, and electrics and plumbing.

Whilst teaching I have met with women who have ambitions to be skilled trades workers. However they meet a brick wall, rather than a glass ceiling. Many women will go to college without previous experience or their own tools, unlike their male counterparts. On top of this some women will have childcare responsibilities, and often a discouraging family. If they get the qualification, they then have to apply for a job. Here they are openly met with derision and disbelief, akin to many other historic struggles for equality, or they are told that they cannot be considered for employment because they have no work experience. The only way to get work experience is to be taken on as an apprentice. Apprenticeships are only available up to 18 years. Women 16-18 are the most likely to suffer from being treated as a sexual object and bullied. Older women are missing from the workforce, who might have provided a source of mentoring and experience. Women often only consider a career in construction later on, when they realise that the world of work offered to women is lower paid, lower status, less satisfying. What is on offer to a practical woman?.....

Now the situation is getting worse. The NVQ qualification has been changed so that evidence must be based on work experience. Women can't get jobs, when trained, how are they supposed to get jobs whilst training! My blood boils over at the catch 22s of the situation. Why are we encouraging women to think of working in this industry when it so blatantly disregards our potential? Why are we raising false hopes unless we are prepared to bring about real changes? Why is it that even the Armed Services have addressed this issue and changed, but the possibility of change in the Construction Industry seems to be invisible, and no one is prepared to break down the barriers? It will take more than a few pioneers to destroy the myth of ages; we need action at the employers level.

WOPSAT working in partnership with other organisations including the Wai Yin Chinese Women's Society, intends to do something about it... Watch this space. I invite further comments and info.

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