

On Equal Terms: gender & solidarity **by Susan Eisenberg**

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Welcome

Everything you thought you knew
 must be relearned overnight.

How to walk.

Walk, not trip, over cords, 2×4s,
 used coffee cups, concrete cores,
 Walk, 40 pounds on your shoulder, across
 rebar or a wood plank: glide,
 not wobble, not look like the bounce
 beneath each bootstrap scares you

...

How to respond—within protocol—
 when someone takes your ladder or tools,
 imitates your voice on the loudspeaker,
 spraypaints *Cunt* on your Baker staging,
 urinates in your hardhat,
 drives to your home
 where you live alone
 with your daughter
 and keys your truck parked
 in your own driveway.

—from *Stanley's Girl*, Susan Eisenberg

New content, including poetry videos, interview excerpts, and historic documents will be added to the site in the fall of 2023.

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Susan Eisenberg's *On Equal Terms: gender & solidarity* (<https://onequalter.ms>) is an interactive, digital art installation that documents the pioneering experiences of the first women who entered the skilled construction trades in the 1970s, and the women who followed them. Although suitable for any viewers, I plan on incorporating the installation into my undergraduate courses in a state-university labor studies program with students who are in union-sponsored trades-apprenticeship programs. While the content of this art installation is perfect for labor history and labor studies students or union-based workshops, this virtual installation can make any class come alive. Eisenberg's art installation represents the experiences of real workers, raises many questions that are crucial to the labor movement as more workers become interested in unionizing, and provides opportunities for delving into related historical, economic, political, and cultural issues.

Susan Eisenberg's *On Equal Terms: gender & solidarity*

On Equal Terms: gender & solidarity, launched in 2018, is a reconceived digital version of the nine-hundred-square-foot physical mixed-media art installation initiated in 2008. The virtual installation offers an engaging, interactive educational experience. In many ways, Eisenberg's virtual art project is a visual representation of her well-known and classic oral labor history book, *We'll Call You If We Need You: Experiences of Women Working Construction*, first published in 1998 and reissued with a new preface in 2018.¹ The stories of some of the thirty women interviewed for this book—electricians, ironworkers, painters, carpenters, and plumbers—are included in the art installation, as are many of the themes that structure the book.

The overall purpose of Eisenberg's digital art installation is to provoke conversations, asking viewers to make connections between then and now, and to imagine what circumstances need to be changed so that all workers might lead decent and flourishing lives in a more humane and just society. The installation provides a historical link between the raw and physical challenges the first tradeswomen faced in the skilled trades, and the similar experiences of women who enter historically male-dominated occupations, and the similar experiences of all working women, and all low-wage marginalized workers. But most significantly, the installation highlights the discriminatory and exclusionary experiences of a first group of women who entered the trades. This can be an eyeopener for anyone who can't imagine fearing for their life in order to secure a decent-paying job, not having a bathroom down the hall or anywhere nearby, having their car tires punctured as a blatant reminder that you are not wanted at your job, in-your-face sexism and racism, and being the only woman in your "office" (job site). The installation not only presents the physical and emotional challenges these first women faced, but also celebrates the sisterhood, solidarity, satisfaction, joy, and pride that these tradeswomen experienced and that tradeswomen continue to build and share today with their union sisters and brothers. While viewing the installation, one cannot help but ask, "How have circumstances changed for

1. Eisenberg, *We'll Call You If We Need You*.

women in the trades, if at all, or, how have they stayed the same?” And “What work still needs to be done to achieve equity for women in the trades as well as for all working people?” To be sure, these questions hold the possibility for potential research projects for labor studies or labor history classrooms, as well as endless discussion possibilities for all viewers.

Eisenberg’s unique history within the labor movement adds a rich layer of credibility and respect to her art installation. She was among the first cohort of women to enter the construction trades in 1978 as a union electrician apprentice when President Carter, pressured to open the trades up to women, instructed the Department of Labor to set goals and timetables for hiring females on federally funded construction projects. The goals were intended to increase the number of tradeswomen to 6.9 percent of the entire workforce over three years; this goal was never achieved in construction. As a member of Local 103 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Eisenberg worked for fifteen years on construction sites in the Boston area as an apprentice, journeywoman, and foreman. Her trades experiences, insights, reflections, and overall camaraderie with other tradespeople have resulted in several books, essays, poetry collections, and speaking engagements. On her website she describes herself as a “poet, visual artist and oral historian.” Currently, she is a resident artist/scholar at the Brandeis Women’s Studies Research Center and the poetry editor of *Labor* (susaneisenberg.com).

The construction industry is a significant part of our economy, characterized by high-paying jobs and good benefits, especially if unionized; overall, women covered by a union contract earn on average 22.6 percent more per week than nonunionized women.² Today, with over eleven million workers, construction represents almost 7 percent of all those employed in 2021. These statistics rank it sixth among the fourteen industry categories for which the Bureau of Labor Statistics collects data.³ Overall, more than three hundred thousand women worked in construction occupations in 2020, the highest number ever.⁴ Yet women represent fewer than one in twenty of all workers in construction, and at 4 percent of all construction workers, they are significantly underrepresented.⁵ Today the construction industry is 87.2 percent white, 7.1 percent Black / African American, 1.7 percent Asian, and 38.9 percent Hispanic or Latino (these percentages do not add up to 100 percent because there is a large overlap between white and Hispanic).⁶ In fact, Hispanic women led the growth for all women entering the trades after the Great Recession.⁷ Eisenberg’s installation explores the pathbreaking journey of women into this significant, lucrative industry.

2. Sun, Hall, and Shaw, “Stronger Together.”

3. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Household Data Annual Averages, Table 17.”

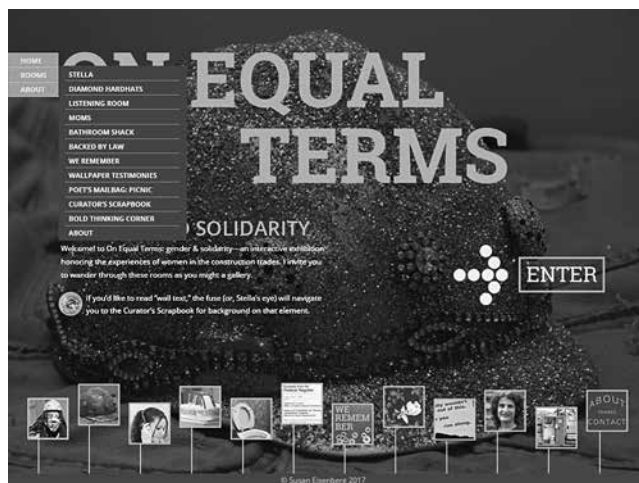
4. Hegewisch and Mefferd, *A Future Worth Building*, 1.

5. Hegewisch and Mefferd, *A Future Worth Building*, 1; Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Household Data Annual Averages, Table 11.”

6. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Household Data Annual Averages, Table 11.”

7. Van Dam, “Why Are Way More Women Suddenly Working in Construction?”

Figure 1. Opening page of *On Equal Terms*.



Navigating the Site

The opening (or landing) page of *On Equal Terms* (fig. 1) invites viewers to “wander through these rooms as you might a gallery.” (Given that the installation has twelve rooms, I will discuss only a handful, but hopefully that will be enough to provide the scope and “feel” of the entire installation.) Like a physical art gallery that utilizes various methods to lead visitors in a preferred flow, the site has a large arrow and an “Enter” cue on the first page, and a “Next” cue at the top of every page. (In the top left corner of every page there is also a small hamburger menu that provides a quick link to every room and its contents.) Similar to an art gallery, there are many diversions to entice viewers to abandon the linear pathway. For example, a row of squares on the bottom of the very first page entices viewers to jump in at random. Each square, with a distinguishing photo, represents a theme that is explored in individual rooms in the installation: tradeswomen’s gear as iconography, work/family issues, graffiti and porn, job deaths and accidents, audio testimonials by tradeswomen on many different topics, and a copy of the 1978 Affirmative Action guidelines. However, I would advise my students to jump to the tenth square/room, the “Curator’s Scrapbook,” and read the short description “About the Curator” for background information about Eisenberg, as well as the “Welcome” section, which provides a brief overview and purpose of the entire project. As Eisenberg states, “The construction industry is both unique and emblematic of larger societal struggles between solidarity and division, between inclusiveness and other-ing. The choice for the industry—in situations of harassment or discrimination—between protecting the high-value veteran employee or the newcomer, is the same across all occupational fields.” She concludes, “As you look and listen, I encourage you to consider what would be required to create a workplace, classroom, community, country where each person is treated—not hostilely, not identically, but—on equal terms.”



Figure 2. Stella, Adams Gallery, Suffolk University exhibition, 2009.

An Exploration of Selected Rooms

As with any trip to an art gallery or museum, one can glide through Eisenberg's installation and leave with general yet powerful impressions, but to use the installation as an educational experience requires a bit of planning. To entice my students, I would have them begin with the room labeled "Stella." Amazing Stella—a life-size replica of a tradeswoman, in typical coveralls with an iconic tool belt, standing on a six-foot ladder, in a simulated jobsite—was originally created in 1990 for a physical art show and has been adapted for an online experience (fig. 2). She is presented in a clever, 360-degree rotating view. Her braided hair is made from flannel work shirts; her face is a collage of tradeswomen faces; her eyes are fuses; and her lips (viewers/students can decide whether she's smiling or smirking, and why) are fashioned from green electrical wire. And then there is Stella's diamond hardhat, which has a room of its own—a pictorial collage of women workers in hardhats of various colors, conscientiously working in different postures, which, according to the information in the "Curator's Scrapbook," shows "how capable women are at all aspects of their trade." I might ask my students, after viewing the entire installation, to return to the diamond hardhat and ask what the diamond hardhat represents to them. Why diamonds?

Hanging from Stella's body are numerous tags—the kind used to label valves—on which tradeswomen have written phrases that represent how they were "labeled or diminished" (fig. 3). The telling tag-messages include "Go home, you're taking a man's job"; "We don't trust women here"; "Cute young thing—fat cow—thunder thighs"; "I'm going to break you"; "Radical Bull-Dyke"; and "Here's the Quota." Students might write their own tags—about their own jobs, or what they perceive they might hear as tradeswomen today, or as workers in other nontraditional jobs for women (or men), or as workers who don't conform to certain gender expectations.

The messages on "Stella's tags" reflect a historical context when ugly stereotyping and threats of brutal violence by men, mostly white, were routinely used to maintain their hierarchy and discourage women from entering or remaining in the trades. Tradesmen feared that women would enter the exclusive male-dominated trades, learn the skills that gave the tradesmen their status, and, indeed, defined their manliness, and diminish or eradicate the economic security and well-being of tradesmen's families. Overall, women's presence in the trades undermined the powerful ideology of the "family wage," which, according to Nancy MacLean in *Freedom Is Not Enough*, "shored up the place of white men as household breadwinners and the citizens of public life, as it consigned to secondary status not only white female earners but also most men and women of color."⁸

It can be a lesson for students to contrast the brutally vicious messages on the "Stella tags" as representing particular historical and economic forces with the rather benign but insipid and powerful propaganda formulated by the US government to pull women (mainly married women) into the workforce during World War II, as

8. MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, 13.



Figure 3. Stella's tags.

shown in the film *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*. Today's students roll their eyes in amazement while viewing *Rosie the Riveter*, where homemaking skills such as sewing, operating kitchen gadgets, and even filing one's nails are shown as adaptable to the skills required in wartime factory jobs. Women were needed in these "men's" jobs and, in contrast to the first tradeswomen, were encouraged to enter the workforce as patriotic, capable, and respected workers. However, what often gets lost in this movie version is the fact that most "Rosies" were low-wage women who always had been in the labor force and jumped at the chance to earn higher wages in the war-focused industrial jobs vacated by men going off to war. In fact, three-quarters of the nineteen million women who worked during the war were already in the workforce or had been previously employed prior to marriage.⁹ After the war, most of these women didn't have the option of returning to being full-time housewives. Rather, they were forced to give up the higher-paying industrial jobs to the returning soldiers and go back to those from which they came: low-paying, low-status, more traditional women's jobs as domestics, waitresses, or cafeteria workers.¹⁰

But why, in the 1970s, did women become interested and active in entering the trades—historically characterized as men's work that was too physical, too dirty, and too dangerous for women? A combination of forces—economic, the feminist movement with its emphasis on equity of pay and opening economic opportunities

9. Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 131.

10. Cobble, Gordon, and Henry, *Feminism Unfinished*.

for women, and the role of government—all played a part. The construction industry and the building trades had the reputation of being one of the last holdouts to the entry of workers of color and women—women seeking something better than the low-paying, dead-end, typically female occupations.¹¹ In the 1970s, after decades of post–World War II relative prosperity and an increased standard of living, worker’s wages stalled as forces prevented workers from securing their fair share of increasing productivity. As a result, more married women were pulled into the labor force as the two-income family became essential to maintain expected and familiar lifestyles. Between 1979 and 2018 the average income of middle-income households grew from \$57,420 to \$69,559. If not for the contribution of the working female partner, the household’s income would have increased to only \$58,502.¹² And increasing numbers of families were headed by women who were responsible for their family’s well-being. Women, especially those in low-income households, needed and wanted well-paying jobs with benefits to maintain their families. From 1990 to 2019 the share of households headed by single women increased from 17.6 percent to 22.6 percent. If married women who head two-earner households are added in, the percentage of women-headed-households increases to over 50 percent, with Black female-headed households reaching 60 percent.¹³ The blue-collar jobs in the trades, especially if unionized, became more desirable—not only because a college degree was not required but also because of the good pay and other economic benefits as well as offering unique career opportunities, the chance to perform physical labor, work outside an office, learn new skills, and face new challenges that differed in major ways from more traditional “women’s jobs.” Women saw construction jobs as essential to economic security for themselves and their families, as well as a liberating choice that was being championed by the women’s movement and organizations.

One of the first advocacy organizations for women was called simply Advocates for Women. Founded in 1971 in San Francisco, this organization focused on gaining economic power for low-income women and was instrumental in helping them gain access to the skilled trades. Over the next ten years, over ninety-one such organizations joined together to form a Women’s Work Force Network. From this group, a task force was formed for the explicit purpose of getting women into the building trades, especially economically disadvantaged women.¹⁴ Also grounded in the women’s movement, United Tradeswomen, a grassroots organization, was formed in New York City in 1979 for the purpose of helping working-class women gain entry into blue-collar, male-dominated jobs. Given that women were typically the only females at their job sites, United Tradeswomen served as a place they could meet, talk, support each other, plan public forums and actions, and learn the ropes about being new members in their unions. Numerous similar support organizations sprang

11. Palladino, *Skilled Hands, Strong Spirits*.

12. Sawhill and Guyot, “Women’s Work Boosts Middle-Class Incomes”; Boushey, *Finding Time*.

13. Goodman, Hyun Choi, and Zhu, “More Women Have Become Homeowners.”

14. MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, 268–71.

up around New York City and in other cities across the United States.¹⁵ In 1974, union women founded the Coalition of Labor Union Women, which advocated for affirmative action for women and men of color as well as offering support and resources for antidiscrimination causes.

Today this tradition of collective efforts to get women into the trades continues—efforts by tradeswomen, union programs and contractors, government programs, and elected officials. For example, in Massachusetts, more than 10 percent of those in building trades union apprenticeship programs are women. While this percentage is still low, it is triple the national average and the highest such percentage in the United States.¹⁶ Women continue to support each other and spread the word about the construction industry. In October 2022, more than three thousand women attended the Tradeswomen Build Nations conference held in Las Vegas; it claimed to be the largest gathering of women construction workers in the world.¹⁷ And with the Biden administration's initiative to get one million more women into the trades as an estimated two hundred thousand infrastructure construction jobs are created, there are high expectations for increasing, significantly, the number of women working construction.¹⁸

Backed by Law, Wallpaper Testimonies, and the Mom's Room. I would ask my students to view these three rooms next because they continue the historical/economic/cultural narrative of women entering the trades and add a new dimension to the important but more standard narratives of labor history. "Backed by Law" and "Wallpaper Testimonies" present the legal environment of the era. These two rooms, with archival materials, document the significant organizing and collective effort by many different groups of women, other organizations, and labor to secure more legal protections for women trying to gain access to the construction industry.

The defining social movement, the civil rights movement, provided the landscape on which women workers seeking access to the male-dominated jobs in the building trades put themselves on the legislative map. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited employment discrimination based on race, religion, color, or national origin. The Title VII amendment to the act added "sex" to the prohibited discrimination. (Opponents thought that by adding "sex" to the bill, they could ensure it wouldn't pass. That didn't work.) Coalitions of working women, organized labor, the growing feminist movement, trade union feminists, and other organizations continued to agitate, advocate, picket, and put themselves on the front lines, culminating in President Lyndon Johnson's 1967 executive order mandating that women must be included in federally contracted work (Johnson's first executive order only addressed race discrimination). The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 followed, adding more teeth to the struggle. This act granted workers the right to sue employ-

15. Latour, *Sisters in the Brotherhoods*.

16. Johnston, "A Movement Is Building to Get More Women into Construction."

17. Puppel and Rubin, "Effort Launched to Add 1 Million US Tradeswomen in Decade."

18. Puppel and Rubin, "Effort Launched to Add 1 Million US Tradeswomen in Decade."

ers in court as well as extending protection to public employees.¹⁹ And then in 1978 came President Carter's affirmative action initiative. As a result of affirmative action, Susan Eisenberg entered the skilled trades.²⁰ The document, "Goals and Timetables for Female and Minority Participation in the Construction Industry: Affirmative Action Requirements" is included in its entirety, with Eisenberg's comments written in the margins, in the "Backed by Law" room.

Demonstrating the collective efforts required to achieve more extensive legal protections, the Wallpaper Testimonies room includes compelling and riveting stories in women's own words, about the barriers faced by women and other workers in the construction industry, including sexual harassment, disparities in hiring, earnings, health benefits, and pensions. The testimonies cover a series of fourteen hearings between March 1990 and November 1992, held by the New York City Commission on Human Rights and the New York City Office of Labor. While the testimonies are lengthy, they provide compelling reading as well as invaluable information for anyone doing research in this area. One strategy for generating conversations in the classroom might be for students to summarize various testimonies and present them to the class; or, for even more impact, students might take turns reading testimonies out loud, taking on the various roles of the different individuals testifying or asking questions.

Although these pioneering women of course experienced bullying, acts of hatred, and harassment just because they were in "men's jobs," it wasn't until 1986 that the Supreme Court codified that sexual harassment could contribute to a hostile work environment in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.²¹ Sexual harassment as a form of gender discrimination remains a serious issue for women working in the trades. In a recent 2021 study of 2,635 tradeswomen and nonbinary tradespeople conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), more than a quarter of respondents reported that they are frequently harassed "just for being a woman." The same survey reported that while many women feel respected and enjoy their community of coworkers, almost 48 percent said they were held to a different standard than their male coworkers in some aspects of their jobs and that sometimes they had to deal with "unsupportive if not hostile work environments." Twenty-one percent of women of color reported that they are always or frequently racially harassed.²²

I added the "Mom's Room" to this section because it highlights that workers—women and men—are part of families and that policies and laws that extend our social infrastructure to families are still needed to help out all working parents, as Eisenberg describes in the "Curator's Scrapbook" room. The "Mom's Room" presents collage-scrapbook images of vignettes written by individual women. One woman wrote about how tired she was balancing work, kids, and school. Another wrote how

19. Moccio, *Live Wire*, chap. 3.

20. Eisenberg, *We'll Call You If We Need You*.

21. Latour, *Sisters in the Brotherhoods*.

22. Hegewisch and Mefferd, *A Future Worth Building*, 13–16.

embarrassed her son was to see his mom come home covered in mud, wearing overalls, clunky shoes, and a hard hat. Yet another wrote how her child's teacher brought his class to the bridge she was working on, proudly. Another mom recounted a surprise party her entire crew organized to celebrate her pregnancy.

Women entering the trades transformed labor, broadening the consciousness and individual and collective goals of all workers. When the trades were exclusively male, the issues of safe working conditions while pregnant, clean spaces and support for breastfeeding, childcare, paid family medical leave, and other parenting issues were not discussed, much less included in negotiations. When women entered the trades, these issues became topics of everyday conversation, organizing, and collective bargaining.²³

Working in construction typically requires early starting hours, working at various sites every couple of weeks with different starting and ending times, as well as periods of being laid off. Finding childcare that meshes with these changing working conditions is difficult for trades-employed parents, especially single-parent households. In the IWPR survey of 2,635 tradeswomen and nonbinary tradespeople, of those parents with children under eighteen who were considering leaving the trades, 69.3 percent listed difficulties with finding childcare, and 63.4 percent listed lack of accommodations while pregnant as their main concerns. However, the survey results also indicated that being a mother or being pregnant does not cause the respondents to leave what they consider a lucrative career. In fact, almost 60 percent with children under eighteen have not considered leaving the trades; this may reflect the fact that 63 percent of the survey respondents were in a union and thus enjoyed its good pay and benefits.²⁴ The Mom's Room provides the opportunity to talk with students, or have them conduct research, on policies pertaining to the needs of working parents—in the United States and relative to other countries.

We Remember: Work-Related Deaths.

Guideposts
 Building under Construction Collapsed
 Workers, just minutes before, heard
 The beams distress
 And spread an alarm. Every one made it out
 But three plumbers, safely outside, went back in—
 For power tools owned by the shop. Died.
 —from *Stanley's Girl*, Susan Eisenberg

Construction is one of the most dangerous occupations. In fact, in 2021 construction, compared with all other private industries, had the second-highest number of fatalities, 951 (workers in transportation and moving occupations had the highest number

23. Covert, "How the Rise of Women in Labor Could Save the Labor Movement."

24. Hegewisch and Mefferd, *A Future Worth Building*, 21–23, 41.



Figure 4. The “We Remember” wall commemorates women killed while working.

of fatal work injuries, 1,523).²⁵ However, union construction jobs are significantly safer than nonunion jobs. A report by the New York Committee on Occupational Safety and Health found that in 2017, 85 percent of construction fatalities in New York State occurred on nonunion sites, while in New York City, 83 percent of fatalities were on nonunion sites.²⁶ While the OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) fines for construction fatalities in New York State have increased steadily since 2006, these are not significant enough to deter nonunion contractors from pushing the cost-cutting boundaries.²⁷

The “We Remember” room consists of a brick wall with various years, from 1979 to 2017, imprinted on the bricks (fig. 4). Clicking on the different bricks/years leads the viewer to the heartbreaking stories of the many women who were killed while working. One woman was electrocuted while working on a metal platform; another was struck in the head by a crane; another died from an eighty-five-foot fall due to the intense kickback from a power tool; yet another was fatally pinned between scaffolding and an overhead rising. One woman was fatally shot by her estranged husband who was in the same local union, and another died by suicide after being raped by a contractor. The other stories are just as intense and almost unbearable, even more so when collected in this one room.

25. Bureau of Labor Statistics. “Table A-5: Fatal Occupational Injuries by Occupation and Event or Exposure, All United States, 2021.”

26. NYCOSH, “Deadly Skyline.”

27. NYCOSH, “Deadly Skyline.”

Health, safety and security training, and consciousness is imperative for all workplaces, not just for those working in construction, manufacturing, or other “heavy-duty” occupations. All workers need to be protected by laws that are backed up by enforcement; all workers need to be involved in determining what elements are required to make their workplaces safer and secure. Students might consider, relative to the experiences of the first tradeswomen, what comprises “health and safety” in today’s jobs—including domestic violence, racism, gun violence, and adequate job training—associated with different kinds of workplaces, such as offices, classrooms, nail salons, private homes, childcare facilities, and gig platforms, to name just a few.

Similar to the collective activism that underpinned passage of the civil rights and affirmative action laws of the 1960s and 1970s that helped women enter the trades, the Occupational Health and Safety Act was passed in 1970 due to the hard work and dedication of coalitions of trade union leaders, their rank and file, and many other organizations. For the first time, due to this act, employers were held responsible for providing workplaces that were free from health and safety hazards. Students, many of whom are workers and assume that OSHA always existed, might research the vast organizing and educational campaigns that helped achieve this important victory for workers, as well as what changes need to be made to make the act even more effective.

The Bathroom Shack. This room features a toilet in an outdoor, makeshift, walled-in plywood structure on an early construction site. Viewers can click on the toilet to view what women had to put up with—written and pictorial abuse that was right in their faces, reminding them, even when they went to the bathroom to get some relief, that they weren’t wanted. The “entries” are too “creative” to include here. In her book *We’ll Call You If We Need You*, Eisenberg devotes an entire chapter to “sanitation facilities.”²⁸ It should be said that tradesmen want clean, accessible bathrooms with places to wash their hands just as much as women do. In the IWPR survey, about 27 percent of respondents reported seeing porn or graffiti disparaging to women in their work environments.²⁹

The Listening Room. This room includes audios of women electricians, ironworkers, plumbers, painters, and carpenters, telling their stories grouped by various themes: Breaking In, Path-Blockers and Supporters, Family, Passions, Poems. Each theme includes three or four audios, each about two to four minutes in length. Hearing women’s voices, regional accents, and cadences telling compelling, sometimes humorous and often unimaginable stories will have students asking, “Is this possible? Did women really work under these circumstances?”

For example, in *Breaking In*, a woman talks about how she worked six days a week, twelve hours a day, and none of her coworkers, all men, would talk to her. She was totally ostracized. One man, under pressure from a supervisor, said that he would work with her but would not talk to her. However, a circumstance arose where, due

28. Eisenberg, *We’ll Call You If We Need You*, chap. 9.

29. Hegewisch and Mefferd, *A Future Worth Building*, 15.

to her smaller stature, she offered to perform a dangerous task. Her coworker, knowing how she was being treated, couldn't believe that she would harness up and trust him to lower her thirteen floors down. She said, "My life is in your hands." After she successfully completed the task, he asked if she would like to go for coffee.

In *Path-Blockers and Supports*, in a segment titled "Unsafe as a Lesbian," another woman talks about how, as a tall Irish girl, she felt pretty safe on the job, given that many of the men were Irish. But she didn't feel safe enough to come out as a lesbian, even after ten years on the job and friendships with several of her male coworkers. She also felt "blocked-off" by several straight women who knew she was gay. She says there was the assumption that if you were a woman in the trades, you must be a lesbian. In the recent IWPR survey of tradeswomen, 19 percent of LGBTQ respondents say that they are always or frequently harassed due to their sexual preferences.³⁰

In "Blue-Collar Fashion and Fantasies," a carpenter recounts a fashion show where tradeswomen designed their own work attire. Held in a union hall, she describes an electrician who walked the runway in an S&M-themed outfit, with BX cables hanging off her as whips. A couple of electricians wired up their tool belts to flash on and off, disco style. Another woman designed her hardhat in the shape of a breast to exemplify how she felt on the job—nothing more than an exposed breast walking around. The fashions represented a "taking on of the culture of the industry" and transforming it into an inside joke that all the women shared, only it wasn't a joke—it was their lived experiences.

The themes in the Listening Room are universal, and students might write their own work-related stories as they reflect on the room's themes or develop different themes they think better represent their own work. Students also might consider what current social, economic, cultural, and political systems have bearing on their own work stories—systems that were not in existence for the first women entering the skilled trades. For example, the stories of the women pioneers occurred before the legalization of same-sex marriage, before Black Lives Matter, before #MeToo, before the recent organizing at Amazon and Starbucks and on college campuses, before the rise of the gig economy and a recognition of wage theft, before the pandemic, before Fight for \$15, and before Roe was demolished, to name just a few. Students can get a sense of the impact of the activism, collective efforts, and organizing that have bearing on their own work experiences relative to the first cohort of women in the trades, who had so few.

Poems. In the "Poems" section, Eisenberg reads four of her own powerful poems from two of her published collections, *Stanley's Girl* and *Pioneering*. I have found that students always enjoy writing poems about their work lives and hearing the poems of their peers and union sisters and brothers.

BOLD Ideas. This is the last room to visit, as it asks viewers to consider "next steps" or "solutions." Before delving into the activity in this room, students/viewers

30. Hegewisch and Mefferd, *A Future Worth Building*, 14.

need to visit the “Curator’s Scrapbook,” which describes the purpose of the room and how to engage with it. Here students/viewers are asked to develop a long-range project that will create social change, following six criteria that Eisenberg considers essential for a successful project. On the main page of this room, she includes descriptions of various projects, primarily legislative bills, and asks viewers to rate them according to how many of the six criteria they meet. While making this room interactive is laudable in terms of attempting to promote discussion about the elements of successful organizing, the process is confusing. It needs a leader to focus the discussion, or a mechanism that allows a group of students to talk about potential projects they might engage in together. It’s not a solitary-viewer endeavor.

The room’s four projects, however, are telling. One project/legislative bill describes the Iron Workers International Union Paid Maternity Leave Benefit (2017). Another is *Confronting Harassment in the Construction Industry*, Bill 1223, from 2018, by a former member of the California State Senate, Cathleen Galgiani. Another is California’s *Apprenticeship Discrimination Prohibition Bill 2358*, prohibiting discrimination in apprenticeship’s training classrooms and on their job sites. Viewers can click on Factsheets and Bill Status to obtain additional information. Strikingly, these bills are all “stalled” or “pending,” which seems unfathomable after all these years of struggle and given the public’s assumptions that these issues have already been dealt with through legal or negotiated solutions.

But “BOLD Ideas” brings us full circle and shows us how much work still needs to be done for women in the trades. Strategies to get more women into the trades remain imperative. However, a newer focus concentrates on how to help women be successful and remain in the trades once they gain access. According to the recent 2021 IWPR survey, the factors tradeswomen say they need to succeed in the trades include good earnings, health care, and benefits; preapprenticeship programs; supportive workplace policies (antiharassment and commitment to diversity); and community (including tradeswomen mentors, organizations, and committees).³¹ These factors are more likely to be offered by unions through collective bargaining, but they were what tradeswomen have always wanted and fought for.

Overall, Eisenberg’s installation is an inspiring visual documentation of the challenging experiences faced by the first women entering the skilled trades, and it provides many educational opportunities to discuss the social, economic, and cultural contexts embodied in each “room.” The experiences of the tradeswomen in the installation provide a tool (as it were) to discuss the challenges, victories, and long-term organizing efforts that tradeswomen, and all workers, are engaged in today in the labor movement and other activist organizations. One thing Eisenberg says in the Curator’s Room is an apt message to take away from the installation: “As you look and listen, I encourage you to consider what would be required to create a workplace, classroom, community, country where each person is treated not hostilely, not identically, but on equal terms.”

31. Hegewisch and Mefferd, *A Future Worth Building*, 31.

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