

# THE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF BLACK WOMEN IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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For many, preconceived notions of who a construction worker is gives rise to images of muscular, typically white, men at work in dirt trenches or high rise buildings. This archetype also shapes the ways the health and safety needs of these workers are thought about. This much is obvious for instance, glancing over through the Occupational Safety & Health Administration website's main section on the construction industry which centers physical health concerns. The risks that come with working around everything from abrasive particles to extreme heights are very real but in regard to the concerns of Black women in this industry, only begin to scratch the surface. Compounding and adding to these health issues are the realities of discrimination created by interconnecting violent structures such as capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy. What is being missed as Black women continue to be treated as an afterthought in the realm of health and safety in the construction industry?

The histories of construction trace how this reality has come to be. Kitty Kelly Epstein writes in her paper "Waiting for Wakanda: Activists challenge Black exclusion from the construction industry" that "African Americans performed much of the country's construction labor in the period immediately following the Civil War, but that changed with the consolidation of construction unions in the hands of White immigrants." Examples she lists include the AFL-CIO refusing to support the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and North America's Labor Trades Unions (NATBU) active rejection of Title 7's anti-discrimination regulations. Dr. Roberta Hunte writes in her paper "Black Women and Race and Gender Tensions in the Trades" that "The U.S. apprenticeship system has been a site of civil rights struggle for people of color and for women" and discusses how for Black women oppressive structures have "impacted their abilities to find work, retain work, and/or attain promotion." Violence against Black women being rooted in the construction industry was also reflected in the interviews I was able to hold with several Black women who have worked in the field. Patterns of abuse, harassment, tokenization and invalidation revealed themselves, often enabled or perpetuated by management itself. The need for intentional self-isolation as a form of self preservation was also mentioned time and time again, reflecting the nature of Black women bearing the brunt of the dehumanization created particularly by non-Black men in the industry on their own.

Institutional approaches like an individual reporting to HR, are not meant to protect Black women. Management will choose profit at the end of the day and profit comes at the sake of the humanity of Black women in all industries, something which Black women have been saying perpetually. Policy and bureaucratic routes alone are not enough and for tradeswork in particular we see that even unions, who are meant to be places to turn to in the face of labor injustice, often uphold these realities for the sake of white men in the labor movement. Putting the burden on Black women in the industry to seek better health and safety conditions by themselves, through bureaucratic processes with unaccountable health departments that may or may not come through, can not be enough.

As Black women have had to contend with these realities for centuries they have also done the work of pushing forward community-based approaches to addressing community needs outside the institutions. There are many examples from Black trans women sex workers to Black women tobacco workers pursuing mutual aid efforts. There is transformative justice work which centers the healing of survivors and understands accountability beyond a company enforced anti-discrimination training but through truly transforming the harmful behaviors society instills us with. When thought of in terms of the health and safety of Black women in the construction industry, these processes are powerful testaments to communities pursuing what wellness looks like on their terms and organizations should be putting their resources towards supporting work like this.

Several Black women I spoke with discussed the satisfaction they feel in their work in the construction industry, with one woman in particular mentioning how much she enjoyed getting to show off her ability to build. Rather than something Black women experience despite the heaviness and lack of safety that can come with construction work, this should be a standard and predominant experience. Supporting the pride and fulfillment Black women take in their work must be a central concern in bettering the health and safety of the construction industry.