

THE “ONLY” EXPERIENCE

READ THIS HANDOUT TO YOURSELF BEFORE YOU START THE ACTIVITY

What is the “Only” experience?

Fewer than 1 in 10 people in the construction industry are women. And fewer than 1 in 30 workers on jobsites are women.¹ As a result, many women in the trades find that they are the only woman on their crew or at their jobsite—in other words, they are “Onlys.”

What does this mean for women?

Women who are Onlys are having a significantly worse experience than women who work with other women. They are far more likely to experience everyday sexism—also known as “microaggressions.”² These can be subtle (like when a crew member assumes a woman is an apprentice rather than a journeyman) or more explicit (like when someone makes a demeaning comment). But whether intentional or unintentional, microaggressions signal disrespect.

Based on LeanIn.Org’s research³, we know that women who are Onlys in the workplace are more likely to:

- Have their judgment questioned in their area of expertise
- Be forced to provide more evidence of their competence
- Be mistaken for someone more junior
- Be subjected to unprofessional or demeaning remarks
- Feel like they can’t talk about their personal lives at work

What does this mean for tradeswomen specifically?

Women in the trades are more likely than women in corporate environments to be Onlys, and their experience may be even worse. Because tradeswomen are significantly outnumbered on the job, the dynamics that lead to sexism and bias may be more common. In addition, women in the trades often face pushback because of outdated stereotypes that women are not good builders or cannot handle physical work.

The cost of being an “Only”

Not surprisingly, being an Only can be mentally exhausting. Women who are Onlys often feel intense pressure to perform. And women of color who are Onlys are more likely to feel they are being scrutinized or excluded.

Women who are Onlys in the workplace are also more vulnerable to harassment. Research shows that they are almost twice as likely to have been sexually harassed at some point in their careers, compared to women who work with other women.⁴

To learn more and access key research, visit leanin.org/tradeswomen.

FLIP THIS PAGE OVER TO READ QUOTES FROM REAL TRADESWOMEN.

DIFFERENT CIRCLE MEMBERS SHOULD VOLUNTEER TO READ THESE QUOTES OUT LOUD

Voices of Tradeswomen



It's not uncommon for me as a woman working in the trades to be the one and only. And that experience is sometimes isolating and scary. When I was an apprentice, working in residential plumbing, it was very, very difficult being the one and only. It created situations where I felt like my safety was in jeopardy, and I didn't have anyone else in the trade that I could speak to about the things I was experiencing."

Judaline, 49, a plumber with 20+ years' experience



I worked for a very small shop of 10 white men. I was the very first woman these gentlemen ever worked with, and as a Latina, the first person outside of their own race. I got ignored a lot of times. One gentleman never talked to me when we worked together. It took about 3 to 6 months to gain their trust."

Cristina, 47, a plumber with 19 years' experience