

## Women Find Success in the Mechanical Contracting Despite Low Industry Participation Rate

### *Female Executives at Chicagoland Construction Firms Urge Awareness, Discuss the Importance of Networking*

**CHICAGO**—The *2015 State of Women-Owned Business Report* released by American Express OPEN in May confirmed that the number of women-own businesses continues to show rapid growth, with a 30 percent share of all businesses now owned by women. A “concrete ceiling” remains, however, in the construction industry, where a much lower share of firms—at just seven percent— are women-owned.

The construction industry lags behind in female participation, which, at 8.9 percent, has not improved much since the 1980s. “The barriers have come down” said Kathy McCauley, owner and President of McCauley Mechanical Construction, Inc. in Bridgeview, Ill., “I haven’t necessarily seen more women entering the industry though.”

Although recent data indicates that the prevalence of women-owned construction firms has increased significantly since 1997, the *2015 State of Women-Owned Business Report* reveals that the number of women in the construction industry, which declined during the most recent recession, have yet to recover to pre-recession levels.

“I have not seen a lot more women entering the industry, but I have noticed more women entering on the operations side—in engineering and sales,” said Karen Riffice, owner of Amalgamated Services, Inc. in Frankfort and an industry veteran like McCauley.

Catherine Tojaga, a mechanical engineer and the owner of CT Mechanical, Inc. in Lombard, Ill., attributes the sluggish growth of women in the construction industry to a general lack of awareness about the promising opportunities available to them. “[A career in the construction industry] is great for women because they multi-task well and... [since] it gives them the opportunity to do both office and field work,” said Tojaga, “But interns don’t know it’s an option,” she said, emphasizing a greater need to encourage and recruit young women who might otherwise avoid the field due to outdated stereotypes.

Despite the low concentration of women in the construction industry, especially in the trades, the numbers are promising for women that have entered the field. The *2015 State of Women-Owned Business Report* showed that women-owned firms in the construction industry are rivaling their male-owned counterparts in terms of economic viability, yielding much stronger economic clout than is average for other types of women-owned businesses.

According to the report, 11 percent of women owned construction firms demonstrated “high economic impact,” meaning they surpassed \$500,000 in revenue, whereas the average for all women-owned businesses is a mere four percent.

The construction industry offers a number of career paths and entry points for women, who enter the industry with a diverse range of experiences and skills. “I happened upon the construction industry by chance,” said Brenda Wheeler, Vice President in charge of day-to-day operations at Jason Mechanical in Joliet, who brought her experience in hospitality and customer service to the field after gaining exposure

through family members who worked in the construction trades.

Similar to other fields, education and networking remain vital for success in the construction industry. “The more you know, the more powerful you are, and the more confident you are. The educational opportunities offered through MCA Chicago have helped me out a lot in my career,” said Lindsey Grilec, a service consultant at Orland Park-based Southwest Town Mechanical Services, in reference to the Mechanical Contractors Association of Chicago’s Construction Education Institute.

Business owners McCauley and Riffice both said they took advantage of classes at the Construction Education Institute as well, where they each sat on several committees and assumed leadership roles. “Committees are the best way to learn about the industry and develop relationships with others who can help you in the business,” said Riffice, “Networking is essential. It taught me how others in the industry work.”

For more information on the Mechanical Contractors Association of Chicago and its contractor members, please visit [mca.org](http://mca.org).