

Welding jobs are in demand and more women are signing up

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Sandra DeBoard lines up a plate to make marks for drill holes in a piece of steel being used to build a lamp during the Women Who Weld course at the Addison Iron Fabricators in Detroit, Michigan, March 31, 2016. Ryan Garza/Detroit Free Press/TNS

DETROIT, Mich. — A half-dozen women recently sat around a table at a Detroit studio. They leaned in as teacher Ralph Taylor taught them how to weld. Welding is a process of melting together, or joining, metals and plastics.

“It’s all right if you try and mess up. Everyone messes up,” Taylor told his students, trying to put them at ease and push them to take risks at the same time.

The women in the welding class are working with a new nonprofit group, Women Who Weld, which teaches welding skills to women. Many of the students are single mothers and living in shelters. The nonprofit group hopes to increase the number of women in the welding trade. According to the U.S. labor department, more than 95 percent of welding workers are men.

Taylor said women who weld deserve the same respect — and pay — as men in the trade.

"There's A New Mindset In Women"

As the economy — the level of business activity and availability of jobs — recovers, more skilled workers are needed. There has been a struggle to add more women to the workforce in jobs that have been typically performed by men.

"It is not an easy trade, but it's not impossible," said Samantha Farr, who founded Women Who Weld while attending the University of Michigan.

Women have been fighting to enter all sorts of jobs for a long time. Along the way, they are battling views that women cannot do the same work as men. They have also been fighting for the same pay.

"There's a new mindset in women," said Jane Owen. They are taking on more jobs that are traditionally taken by men. Owen coaches women on how to be the leaders and managers of a company.

In January, General Motors board named Mary Barra, the first female CEO of a major global automaker, as chairwoman. It is one of the highest positions you can reach in a company. Barra has become a good example for other women seeking top corporate jobs.

In March, five members of the U.S. women's national soccer team — champions at the Olympics and World Cup — filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The players said that although they had excellent performance on the field, they were paid far less than male soccer players.

Skills Are In Demand

"You talk about women welders — that's an area that, obviously, many women aren't in," said Tanya Allen, the president of the Detroit chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners. "But, you'd be surprised the other areas that other women aren't in, too."

Farr, a 29-year-old city planner, said she became a welder in graduate school. Her great-grandfather was a welder.

She thought she might benefit from learning the skill, so she took a class.

"I loved it," she said. "It felt natural, relaxing."

She took an independent study course to learn more, and then, she decided to teach other women how to weld. She created a nonprofit group and applied for grants to pay teachers and purchase equipment.

Welding jobs, she said, are in demand.

Welding Jobs Are Hot

Welding has long been considered a dirty job, with smoke-filled air and sparks flying. That may be one reason why it has been seen as a man's job, said Cindy Weihl, a senior manager of public relations at the American Welding Society.

But Weihl said there are many types of welding jobs — and some are quite different from the stereotypical image. The trade group is working to change the belief that it's a man's job — and bring in women.

“Women,” Weihl said, “tend to be better welders. They tend to pay more attention to detail and are patient.”

Ralph Taylor has been welding for more than 30 years and is a former Detroit Public Schools teacher. He believes that if there are going to be more women in the industry, the attitudes of women — and men — must change.

More women, he said, need the confidence to do the job and more men need to accept women in the industry.

Bring On The Challenge

Taylor's students said they are eager to take on the challenge of welding.

“When you think welding, you think it's a man's job,” said Brittany Shepherd, 26. “You don't think about women doing it.”

Daniela Hagen, who also is taking the class, said she wants to try to make a career of welding.

“Now, anybody can do anything,” Hagen, 23, said. “Any girl can do construction. Any girl can do plumbing. And any girl can do welding. It's not just for men. Women can do exactly what men can do. We just need to not be scared to try.”