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## Tradeswomen Now and Tomorrow (TNT)

### CASE STATEMENT

#### Introduction

Tradeswomen Now and Tomorrow (TNT) is a national network of organizations and individuals committed to promoting women's economic equity by increasing the number of women in trades and technical fields and by improving their working conditions. This paper will present the origins of this new coalition and describe why it is important for an organization like this to be initiated now.

TNT is comprised of member organizations from Oregon to Maine, representing tradeswomen and programs to increase women's access to the trades in more than forty states. Our partner organizations are responsible for innovative programs and policies on a local and state level, with some extending their impact on the national stage. The goal of TNT is to bring isolated activities and organizations together to create a national voice and visibility for issues of importance to tradeswomen and women's access to these male-dominated careers. TNT was founded to redress the socio-cultural, political and institutional barriers that impede women's entry and sustained employment in male-dominated, blue-collar fields. The need to have a national voice has never been more important.

#### Tradeswomen Now and Tomorrow is designed to:

- Influence national policy relating to women employed in nontraditional fields;
- Promote the enforcement and expansion of federal policies to increase women's access to male-dominated careers;
- Promote and support the development of organizational efforts of regional and locally-based groups of tradeswomen to expand their capacity for regional advocacy and leadership;
- Identify policy and practice to ensure that all women who enter trades or technical fields are able to work in environments that are safe, nondiscriminatory, free from harassment, and offer meaningful opportunities for professional advancement;
- Build collaborations with organizations dedicated to preserving and enhancing equal employment opportunity and civil rights;
- Create visibility and awareness to eliminate stereotypes about women's work.

#### The History of Women in the Trades

Women's access to high-wage, high skilled blue collar jobs has been limited by longstanding patterns of occupational segregation by gender, which is one of the most pervasive and persistent features of the workforce. The degree of occupational segregation remained stable from 1900 through 1970, only beginning to show signs of decline in the seventies. The decrease was primarily due to women's entry into professional and managerial occupations. Women have made few gains in entering male-dominated, blue-collar jobs in construction and manufacturing.

Nonetheless, there are several examples in history of women successfully entering jobs typically reserved for men in these industries. During both world wars women in the U.S. worked in shipyards, aircraft and munitions plants taking up welding torches, hammers, and machine tools to fill jobs previously held by men. After WWII women were aggressively pushed out of the labor market to return to domestic duties and free jobs for returning male veterans. In 1978 many of these jobs were again opened to women as a result of federal affirmative action

*A national coalition of tradeswomen's organizations and advocates*

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policies. These policies established goals for the hiring of women on federally funded construction projects and as participants of federally registered apprenticeship programs. By 1981 shifting political leadership diminished the impact of these laws, and although women's participation in nontraditional blue-collar careers has increased, the percentages never reached the federal goals. Two decades later and a full fifty years after six million women became the famed "Rosie the Riveter" during World War II, women represent less than three percent of all trades workers throughout the country.

The history of the tradeswomen movement has been the struggle to survive as pioneers in an unwelcoming world and to change conditions that prevent women from being fully integrated into well-paid, blue-collar jobs. As isolated tradeswomen sought connection with other women working in nontraditional careers they formed local support organizations. Simultaneously, job training programs were developed to increase the preparation of women for these high-wage and high-skill jobs. When federal polices suffered from a lack of enforcement, local groups began organizing to preserve women's gains in nontraditional careers and to substitute their own activities and initiatives for government action.

Since the early eighties many of the organizations have developed sophisticated programs and strategies to expand the pipeline for women and girls to have access to nontraditional jobs. They have developed partnerships with employers and unions, educational institutions and public agencies. Many have shared their innovative curriculums, forged regional alliances and come together informally and at rare but vital conferences. All are working to promote the belief that women's access to jobs in the construction, manufacturing and other traditionally male dominated industries makes good economic sense for women and the economy as a whole.

### **The Need to Improve Women's Economic Equity**

While the percentage of women working in the labor force has steadily increased, 80% of them are employed in sectors – retail, clerical, and service – that do not pay a livable wage. Nontraditional jobs are an important vehicle for women to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Jobs in the skilled trades or technical fields offer median wages averaging between \$14 and \$35 an hour, often with medical and retirement benefits. Jobs that are female-dominated have typically low wages and many do not offer benefits, on the job training and expanded career paths that the trades offer. For example, the average hourly wage of a childcare worker, a traditionally female occupation, is \$6.76 compared to \$20.85 for a laborer, a traditionally male occupation. Nationally, women still earn only 74% of men's earnings. Occupational segregation by gender is a primary factor in the persistent wage gap between the earnings of men and women. The ghettoization of women into only a few jobs keeps women's wages low; expanding women's employment options will increase wages of all women.

The wage gap marks women's ongoing economic inequity and contributes to the feminization of poverty. Forty-four percent of women in the labor force reported that they were the sole support of themselves or their families in 1992. Forty-five percent of these households supported by women report living below the poverty level. Indeed, of those living in poverty in the United States, a full 85% are *working* women with children. For women who have needed public assistance, the recent restructuring of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), requires them to transition to the labor force. These women need expanded employment options that do not thrust them into the ranks of the working poor, but will allow them to find jobs that offer family-sustaining wages.

Economic equity is the best argument for opening access to family-sustaining, career path occupations to women. But women's integration into the full range of occupations is important to women's ability to be full contributors to our communities. The skills of building, fixing, and maintaining the physical infrastructure we all depend on gives women an important avenue for building self-esteem, taking pride in tangible accomplishment, and gaining confidence as responsible partners in community development. It also helps women become more self-reliant, independent and achieve greater equal status overall.

The economic health of our country would also benefit from expanding and diversifying the pool of workers for industry. The critical shortage of skilled workers in manufacturing and construction is a growing concern of these important industries. Average annual employment in construction increased from 4.5 million in 1992 to 6.3 million in 1999 – an increase of nearly 40% (as compared to an increase in 18.8% in the economy as a whole). While a boon for construction trades employers, such growth (which will require hiring 240,000 new employees per year) poses significant challenges for an industry that retires over 200,000 workers annually. Changing workforce

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demographics require that these employers look to the women, minorities, and immigrants who will comprise 85% of those entering the workforce this year.

Despite the opportunities presented by industry and women's economic need to pursue nontraditional careers, the barriers to women's increased participation in nontraditional employment remain numerous and complex. Stereotypes about women's roles in the family and in the labor force limit women's choices about careers and access to jobs. Young women in schools are rarely steered toward trade and technical careers or face discouragement from counselors and teachers about nontraditional vocational choices or isolation in classrooms filled with male students. Adult women lack information, female role models and the networks to assist them in entering a skilled trade. In addition women are often unprepared for the physical challenges and technical skills required of nontraditional work. Women who overcome these barriers still face discrimination in hiring and retention by employers and training programs. Tradeswomen face continual challenges in maintaining steady work and landing long-term assignments. Male dominated workplaces are often notorious for creating hostile work environments, and tradeswomen complain of sexual harassment, isolation, disparate on-the-job training and lack of opportunities for career advancement.

To address these barriers tradeswomen's organizations have developed outreach, training and retention programs that have proven successful. But limited funding has kept these programs from having greater impact. The few resources to support successful programs have recently suffered from cutbacks at federal and local level. Changes in 1999 in the federal Carl Perkins Vocational-Technical Education Act eliminated gender equity set-asides that required state boards of education to spend a percentage of their funds to promote nontraditional employment. A similar change in the federal job training policy eliminated legislation that established the Nontraditional Employment Act for Women, leaving the new Workforce Investment Act with only a weak reference to training female recipients for high-wage, high skilled jobs. At the same time, the public debate on affirmative action has weakened already limited enforcement of local, state and national equal employment opportunity policies.

In order to ensure that the current generation of tradeswomen does not suffer the fate of the Rosie the Riveters from the 1940's and to expand these high-wage, high-skilled jobs to other women we must act on a national level. To effectively address the cultural and systemic challenges that limit women's access to nontraditional fields we must expand our local advocacy into a collective national voice. Indeed, while individual tradeswomen's organizations have been effective in educating, training and supporting women and girls in their pursuit of trades and technical careers, the impact of their work has been largely local – and constrained by federal policies and practices over which they have had little influence.

### **The Origins of TNT**

In a recent survey of tradeswomen's organizations over 95% ranked the need for advocacy on tradeswomen's issues as critically important. Respondents indicated that a national organization is vital to address issues including preserving affirmative action, creating female and family friendly workplaces and policy, and expanding the funding stream for job training and work with school age women and girls. They agree that a national organization could serve an important function as a clearinghouse for strategies, policy and program initiatives, help groups replicate the best practices of successful models and provide technical assistance to companies and unions nationwide to promote the successful integration of women in the trades.

Just as tradeswomen experience isolation on the job, tradeswomen's organizations experience isolation in pursuit of their mission. For over twenty years, we have individually developed direct service and advocacy programs that have been recognized as models worthy of replication – but we have lacked the time, resources, and the appropriate vehicle for sharing our collective expertise and knowledge. And while we have done our best to encourage the formation of new tradeswomen's groups, we have been limited in our ability to provide them adequate support and information.

TNT is already playing a critical role to promote women's economic equity and eliminate occupational segregation by gender. It is vital to expand this fledgling national voice to ensure that women and girls can have equal employment opportunity and we can all look forward to the day when the phrase "nontraditional job" will be an anachronism.