

Women in welding on the increase

Globally, the number of women in welding is increasing, but at the moment only 6% of welders in the US are women. It is not a new concept, however, as during World War II many of the welders on the liberty ships were women.

Helyn A Potter became Rosie the Riveter and joined the war effort when her husband was away in the Army Air Corp and she had to fend for herself. After only 90 hours of training she could run a straight bead at perfect penetration. She was hired at the Curtis Wright Aircraft Plant for 65 cents an hour where she welded parts for the P-40 War Hawk (Flying Tiger), C-46 Commando Transport and the Helldiver. She later switched to riveting on the P-40 War Hawk fuselage until the end of the war.

During the recent Certification awards evening of SAIW quite a few ladies received welding inspector qualifications. Judy Bosch received Inspector Level 1 with distinction, but out of 80 qualifications awarded, only six were ladies; that's 7.5% - not far off the American statistics. According to the American Welder, women possess certain characteristics that make up a good welder, including great hand-eye co-ordination and patience. A woman's professional role in the metal trades is increasing as women discover alternative opportunities previously dominated by men.

Gender should not matter

Carmen Adams-Hoffman, the career development project manager of MerSeta, working closely with SAIW on the WorldSkills Competition, said: "Women and men who are inclined to choose welding as a career should be supported to perform at their optimum. It is great that diverse contexts where any gender is comfortable to work together to deliver quality in the workplace can be created. Gender should not matter, but more what talent and skill is being displayed."

Adams-Hoffman contends that welding is a good career choice for women. It pays well and if you are physically fit and able there is no reason why a woman should not go into welding. It is possible to keep your femininity while being a welder; identity, personality and character are not determined by a career choice. The quality of the welder is also not determined by gender, as internal and external motivators will be at play. Being in a male-dominated industry herself, she relies on technical, task-oriented people regardless of gender. "I've always enjoyed good working relations with males. I come from an education and development angle and so I keep what I'm good at and remain who I am in all negotiations and engagements," said Adams-Hoffman. "I think if you keep to what you know and are experienced in it is better for all parties."

However, it does seem as if there could still be a glass ceiling for woman in welding. On the "Indeed" blog Sandy from East Texas wrote: "I am a woman welder and have 35 year experience. Why is it so hard for men to accept women out in the field? I am 6G certified and have my own rig, but I had one man tell me that he thought it would be too distracting to have a woman in the field. I have worked as a structural welder and was the only woman there. I did not stop production and I did

not cause any accidents." Adams-Hoffman's advice is that, although it is difficult to progress and there may still be issues depending on the organisational culture, it is necessary to use your talent and to demonstrate what you are able to perform when the chance is there.

Perceptions have changed dramatically

Bosch, who has been working for the engineering firm Specialist Mechanical Engineering for six years, feels that perceptions about woman in welding have changed dramatically over the last couple of years. Whereas in the beginning of her career she often got snide remarks, she is now accepted as an equally qualified and capable professional in the industry. She started her career as a draughtsman, but with her husband being a welder she quickly became intrigued by the career choice and when a position opened at the firm, she jumped at the opportunity.

Bosch has a passion for welding. "It is a very interesting and rewarding career choice", she said. "The training at SAIW was fantastic and a lot of effort was taken to prepare us fully with the knowledge and skills needed to enhance our careers." Bosch always had an affinity for technology and went to Technical High School, John Voster VORSTER? in Pretoria, where she matriculated in 2002 with subjects such as technical draughting and mechanics. Her role at the moment includes the compiling of quality control plans, checking welder qualification ranges, compiling work instructions, data capturing - gas analysis, weld mapping, visual inspection of material and preparations, fit-ups, pre-heating, root runs, inter-pass temperatures and post welding inspection.

While being in a metallurgical world is a tough career choice, it is rewarding and possible to succeed said Adams-Hoffman. She is married and has a 14-year-old daughter. She loves gardening, writing and cooking, yet she manages to balance her roles as a mother and a wife with her position in a male-dominated industry. Her advice to women who would like to go into welding is to plan the learning pathway carefully. Keep a well-balanced life so that you get everything you need from life and from relationships. Have the vitality to reach for what you need from creation.

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