

STARTING OUT

A ROUGH GUIDE TO WORKING LIFE

CAN A FEMALE REPORTER SURVIVE A DAY AS A LABOURER?

Ray O'Rourke's comment about sites being no place for women sparked widespread outrage, but could he have had a point? **Emily Wright** put on her steel-capped boots and spent a day ripping up floorboards to find out

As I walk on to the site, everything stops. Like a Mexican wave in reverse, the guys lower their tools, conversation tails off and the only sound is my awful steel-capped toes clunking along the ground. There's a mixture of eyebrow raising, cheeky winks and low whistles and then some manly nods and encouraging smiles. It's not until I am a few metres on, that I hear: "Mmm, nice arse."

So far, so much as I expected. I'm spending a day working on a building site to find out there is any truth in Ray O'Rourke's infamous speech at the British Council for Offices conference in May. In case you missed it, and the resulting two month long deluge of angry letters, the Laing O'Rourke chairman informed his audience that a building site was "not a place where women fit".

Thanks to the consent of a game chief executive, who must remain nameless, I'm posing as a graduate doing work experience on a large-scale refit job over eight floors of a central London office block – there are only seven women working with 200 men. I am wearing the full gear – safety hat, high-visibility vest, ill-fitting jeans and steel-capped boots. As I am led towards the hoist that will take me up to the fifth floor – my office for the day – I try to ignore the comments, which are, by now, coming thick and fast: "I bet you're a real Essex girl slag, incha love?"

When I see the hoist, I forget all of the bad language in an instant. It's a rickety red cage running up and down the outside of the building. It looks terrifying, but I pack myself in with the others for the hot, sweaty ascent. When I get to where I'll be spending the day pulling up flooring, it's a bit more welcoming. The guys are generally helpful and polite – almost too polite: "Um, alright Em, love, would it be okay if you just took up, or um, lifted that bit of that flooring for us? No problem though, take your time. Um thanks, thanks a lot. That'd be great if you are okay to do that. Are you? Okay? Any problems, you know where to come."

After about an hour, every muscle is aching and I feel physically sick from the exertion. Even the more female-friendly tasks I'm given, like pulling down plastic sheeting, sweeping, moving wooden walkways, and gaffer-taping wires and loose carpet to the floor are exhausting and my hands are rubbed raw through my gloves.

Some of the men say that despite women's relative physical weakness we are useful to have around – not just for a bit of eye candy, but because we are generally better at



DANGER
Men working

You can't come onto a site and be someone who fades into the background. As a woman you've got to have balls and give it all back a bit. You've also got to ignore the language

JULES, FEMALE SITE WORKER

Q paying attention to detail. But if you can't lift the materials, you become more of a hindrance than a help ... just like I have. By 1pm, I'm saying: "Excuse me, can you lift this for me?" for the 100th time and the smiles and understanding sighs are turning to eye-rolling and tutting.

While we work, the conversation is about as blokey as I'd expect. Football, drinking, and women are the three staple topics and I wander off to lunch with, "I'd definitely do the Welsh one from *Big Brother* but that blonde bitch can fuck right off", still in my ears. But when I bump into one of my workmates outside Tesco I'm surprised by the change in tone. We sit down to eat and in five minutes I know all about the past 15 years of his life. I guess he's in his late 40s, and he starts talking about his past loves and losses, heartbreaks and regrets. He tells me that he thinks anybody will love him again. After we've talked for half an hour he says he feels better about things, and as we walk back to site his relief is clear - an example of how an all-male environment can get too much even for the men themselves.

Back on the site, and by about 3pm people are drifting about a bit more, so I take the opportunity to seek out some of the site's few women for a chat. They say you hardly ever find female labourers on site. "I know it's controversial to say it, but a building site really isn't a place for a girl if she's going to want to be shifting things and labouring," says Laura, a 33-year-old Pole who runs her own industrial cleaning company. "Apart from the physical strength, the only other thing about working on site is all the men. But either you cope with that or you don't. It takes a certain woman. I don't mind. The men don't get silly or gossip or bitch. They just get on and have a laugh. I like that."

Jules used to be a hairdresser but has been working with her husband putting up solar protection panels on windows for 10 years. "Going on site as a woman you're always going to get the stares and the odd comment but how is that different from walking along the street these days? You can't come onto

site and be someone who fades into the background. As a woman you've got to have balls and give it all back a bit. You've also got to ignore the language."

The female toilets are nothing special but they are clean. "They only put those toilets up a couple of weeks ago because I kicked up a fuss," says one woman. "They were good about it but it was ridiculous. We had to find a restaurant or pub before then."

I spend the rest of the afternoon trying to dodge the hard labour, and, when my day finally draws to a close, I am relieved. Rude comments and staring aside, the boys tried their best but as I head for home I feel disheartened.

The on-site manager had told me that I was the first female labourer he'd seen in 20 years. There must be a reason why it is such a rarity. After my own experience I'd say that, as a woman, to take on what is considered to be a man's job you've got to do it well. If you can't, like me, you won't make many friends - and that's not a working environment anyone would feel happy in.

For me, the work was just too hard. My inability to do a good job also rubbed the guys up the wrong way so I felt left out. It didn't help that their supervisor could see that I wasn't coping and so kept barking orders at them: "Get Em some gloves for God's sake, she'll hurt herself. Will you lift that for her? She's struggling over there. You come and finish this, Emily needs a time out." To be honest, even I began to hate me. And, once the novelty had worn off, the men were much happier getting on with their work and pretending I wasn't there.

But their reaction to the skilled women - the electrician and the decorators - was different. Although they got the same kind of ribbing as I did, the men respected them. "They're trained at something they are good at," said one. "They fit in because they just get on with it and blend in. They probably do the job better than us." See, respect. "And when they bend over we get to see what underwear they're wearing." Well, close enough.

It's only when I'm on the bus that I discover a sense of on-site camaraderie - in a fellow passenger, a huge black man who helps me up as I trip over in my ridiculous shoes. "You want to be slowing down before you hurt yourself," he says. "I know what your day's been like. It's hard. I was on at seven and I feel for you, I do." I suddenly realise that he's noticed my screwed-up high-vis vest, and that he's holding one too. "The worst thing about it is that before you know it you're up at six and doing it all over again," he laughs. And I think to myself, "no way".

● To read Ray O'Rourke's comments and the letters that ensued, go to www.building.co.uk/orourkedebate

Impress your boss A bluffer's guide to... Kate Barker

Q Who is Kate Barker and why is everybody talking about her?

A Barker is the superbrain economist who Gordon Brown has asked to look at the planning system - everybody's favourite bit of noire. Her interim report came out last week. She is best known for rebranding the much hated development tax as a "planning gain supplement" in her previous review of housing supply, reigniting the debate on its merits.

Q Sounds like a fun lady. What's her verdict on the planning system?

A Unlike Brown, Barker thinks it's too soon for more legislation after 2004's Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act. But she does believe that some reform is necessary and not only the chancellor she's taking on. Environmentalists were dismayed by her conclusion that the UK is twice as protected from development as other developed countries and that restrictions on out-of-town and greenfield development are unbalancing the economy in favour of larger firms.

Q Everyone's always griping about planning - will anyone take any notice now?

A Hopefully, yes. The Treasury is very serious about reforming the system for the good of the economy, especially with all the billions of pounds it's spending on housebuilding. Judging by previous form though, we may be waiting a while to see any actual change. Barker's report into housing demand and supply came out in March 2004 and the only policy development so far is the recently published consultation on the planning gain supplement.

Q But what should I say about her?

A Whatever you think about the land tax, sorry, supplement or her views on out-of-town development, you can't deny her credentials. Barker is renowned for her thorough and logical approach and enjoyed unprecedented co-operation from housebuilders last time. Her review of the planning system is certainly overdue, so you're looking forward to hearing more of her ideas when she publishes the report later this year. Unless you're an environmentalist, of course, in which case you're getting ready for a fight.

Young Architect of the Year YAYA 2006 Searching for the stars of the future

Former BD YAYA Winners



The Young Architect of the Year Award aims to recognise and reward the UK's most promising architect aged 40 or under, or practices where the majority of principals are under this age limit. In 2006, the award is only open to UK-based architects.

A unique judging process involving internationally renowned architects and academics results in one of the most rigorous and stimulating competitions around. And for the first time this year, the jury will visit built projects by architects on the shortlist. Members of this year's judging panel are:-

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Stephen Bayley, writer and critic
Alison Brooks, Alison Brooks Architects
Spencer de Grey, Partner, Foster & Partners
Paul Monaghan, Partner, Allford Hall Monaghan Morris
John Tusa, Managing Director, Barbican Centre
Ellis Woodman, Buildings Editor, BD

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The winner will be presented with a £5,000 prize at the Architect of the Year Awards ceremony on 2 November 2006 at the London Hilton Hotel on Park Lane. Presenting the trophy in front of this unique audience of nearly 1000 leading clients and architects offers a valuable opportunity. It will highlight the fresh ideas and innovation that arise from a younger perspective on the built environment and the benefits of appointing younger architects and firms. With extensive coverage in BD, bdonline.co.uk and national media, the advantages to winning this award will be greater than ever before.

HOW TO ENTER

For a copy of the entry form, please contact Kate Fisher on 020 7560 4256 or e-mail kfisher@cmpi.biz

CLOSING DATE FOR ENTRIES:
Friday 1 September 2006

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