Breaking down barriers

Samantha Farr, of Women Who Weld, hopes to increase female numbers in the welding industry

By Molly Burgess

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"There are many historical, institutional, and contemporary barriers that have resulted in women constituting roughly 4% of welders in the US," Samantha Farr, Founder and CEO of Women Who Weld, a non-profit workforce development organization that teaches women how to weld and seek employment in the industry.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) reported that as few as 4.5% of welders are women. The welding industry as a whole is currently undergoing a shortage of workers, and in terms of women focused groups for welding, there is minimal representation in the US.

Welding can be a good career choice for women. According to Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) (2018), non-traditional occupations for women, or careers with workforces that are more than 75% male, may offer women higher wages than other traditionally female-dominated careers.

"Welding is an in-demand skill, and there are many opportunities for welders, welding engineers, welding product specialists - to mention only a few professions in the industry - and women can and will continue to fill these various roles," Farr told gasworld.

"Welding is exciting and interesting and can potentially pay very well."

As the welding industry itself is expected to continue its considerable growth in the upcoming years, having

a wide range of opportunities for those seeking a career in welding is key for successful market growth.

Farr has multiple years of experience in the welding industry and after noticing a small representation rate of women, along with her overall experience as a female welder, she took it upon herself to start up the Detroit-based organization.

Formed in 2014, Women Who Weld offers intensive and introductory training programs, including a six-week intensive welding training program that is fully subsidized for unemployed and underemployed women; year-round, partially subsidized, week-long intensive welding training classes' and year-round, low-cost, single-day introductory workshops.

Farr said, "After several years of overseeing business development at a technology start-up in New York City, I decided to move back to Detroit in 2013 to pursue a Masters in Urban Planning at the University of Michigan."

"The architecture, design, and urban planning departments operate in the same building, so I had access to the fabrication lab and decided to take a two hour welding workshop and instantly loved it. Then, with the instructor's approval, I created an independent study in welding and overtime, wondered why I was the only woman ever welding in the fabrication lab."

"So, I merged my background in business development with my interest in economic, community and workforce development and established Women Who Welding in 2014."

At Women Who Weld, Farr and her team offer intensive welding training programs, preparing women for full-time jobs, apprenticeships and continuing education in the welding industry. The team also lead introductory workshops both in and out of Detroit offering further flexibility to students.

Welding in the War

Even though women are represented through a minimal percentage in the industry today, once upon a time, they made up more than half of the total welding workforce. In the 1940s, shortly after the Attack on Pearl Harbor, women were required to fill in at the jobs men left behind as they went to join World War II, welding being a prominent role that needed filling.

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Fabricating numerous products in the war, women proved their abilities within the industry. Rosie the Riveter was an infamous face associated with women who took to hands on jobs like welding in the War. Women Who Weld aims to see another rise of women in the industry. Why is there such a limited representation of women in the industry today?

"Currently, the single greatest deterrent, I believe, is a concern among some women that they will encounter gender discrimination and harassment, perhaps even sexual harassment, and in the event that happens, what will be done about it?" Farr told **gas**world.

"Is there a protocol in place for addressing such behavior and then making sure it never happens again? Many businesses across the welding industry are actively taking steps to eliminate any form of discrimination and harassment in their shops and work environments but unfortunately, some are still lagging behind."

"Women Who Weld aims to develop lasting economic opportunities for economically disadvantaged women, diversify the workforce, and address the talent shortage affecting interrelated businesses and industries throughout Detroit and the US."

The organization relies in part on contributions from businesses, corporations, foundations, and philanthropists for support.

Farr added, "We work one-on-one with each participant on interview and resume preparation. We also provide our participants with information related to full-time welding positions across various industries, apprenticeship training programs, such as the Iron Workers and Sheet Metal Workers, and continuing education programs in welding technology or welding engineering."

"Every Women Who Weld participant who completes our intensive training programs and wants to pursue a full-time career in the welding industry, lands a job as a welder shortly after completing our program. Women Who Weld has a 100% program completion rate and 100% program to employment rate."

Future prospects

Looking forward, although technological advancements are continuing to take place across the industry, there will still be a huge demand for welders and demand for welded products. In terms of female representation, as a result from organizations such as Women Who Weld and the American Welding Society, there is great potential for a rise in women in the industry.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the employment of welders, and those in similar professions, in the US is expected to grow 6% by 2026, compared with 2016 numbers, further illustrating the expected growth in the industry.

"Generally, I think the welding industry will continue to diversify as a result of organizations like Women Who Weld and the American Welding Society making a conscious effort to create opportunities for and promote women in the industry; necessity will play an equally strong role in diversifying the industry as more and more welders in the US are near retirement," Farr told **gas**world.

"There are many opportunities for women across all industries engaged in welding, including automotive, industrial fabrication, energy, defense, aerospace, construction, and many more." gw