

# Silly Boys!

## Tower Work Is for Women (Too)

Interviews reveal women tower hands' opinions about working in the wireless infrastructure industry and what they think of their employers, supervisors and male coworkers.

By Dr. Bridgette Hester

**M**illions of women work in jobs that most might consider to be male-dominated, such as law enforcement, construction, plumbing, oil rigging and commercial fishing. The telecom industry is no exception. However, from the interactions I have had with the climbers and some company owners, it appears that there are more women joining the ranks of the telecommunications industry.

Historically and sociologically speaking, women are one of the most underutilized resources in the workplace. The following information focuses solely on the perceptions, ideas and opinions of the historically underutilized resource in this industry — the women of telecommunications.

I asked female climbers about their number of years in the field, their experience, whether they believe employers have valid concerns about hiring women, their advice to those employers and to women trying to get into the industry, and what they believe they bring to the table.

The female climbers interviewed have from two months to 15 years of experience, and most are seasoned tower hands, supervisors and safety

trainers. They know their jobs, they do their jobs exceptionally well, and they are held in high esteem not only by other female climbers, but also by male climbers with whom they worked. Moreover, these women are highly motivated to learn, they are willing to endure the same elements as any male climber, and they are not above paying their dues to make the wireless infrastructure industry their home.

When I asked male climbers about female climbers I interviewed, I never heard anything derogatory in reply. On the contrary, more often than not I was told that the women were valuable assets and that they would be sorely missed if they were not on a work site. One of the male climbers I spoke with put it another way: "Some of the women in the field can work a tower like a boss."

I asked the women about the most difficult aspect of being female in a

predominantly male industry, and two themes emerged from the answers: frustration and adoration. No woman said she believed that working in a predominantly male industry was difficult. The women said they don't mind proving themselves, but they found it could be frustrating to fight against the stereotypes and predetermined notions based solely on gender. Despite whatever frustrations might present themselves, every woman said she loved the industry, thoroughly enjoyed her work and loved working with her crews.

### Physicality and Effectiveness

What do the ladies have to say about any employer's general concerns about hiring women with respect to the job's physical requirements and how effective women might be? The women said that in their experience, employer fears of hiring women are

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unfounded. Some said women's natural tendencies were to be more communicative, focused, organized and prompt, and to work more effectively with customers.

Two said the question made them feel conflicted. "I've argued why we shouldn't be treated differently based on our gender, yet I am asked why I may be better than some males," one of them said. "The question does have some validity, yet I find myself trying not to appear hypocritical."

The second responded by saying, "I think that I am better at some things than other coworkers, but I never feel that it's because I'm female, rather than because I'm me," she said. "I generally show more attention to detail and find ways to work smarter,

not harder, but any man could do that as well. I think the fight is more for gender equality in this industry, not for gender acceptance. We're just tower hands, period. We all have different strengths and weaknesses that every strong leader or foreman should take into consideration blind of gender when assigning tasks."

As for physical ability, they all said that just because they are women doesn't mean they can't handle the demands. Strength, endurance and the ability for the body to handle the strain of such a physical job are not monopolized by males. Anyone who has been in the industry can certainly say they have seen more than one male climber who couldn't handle the physicality of the job. Give a female

climber the opportunity, and if she can't effectively do her job for lack of physical capability to handle the load, or because she has poor rapport with customers, you will know it quickly.

### Men and the Workplace

Almost all of the female climbers said that concerns over relationships between male and female tower hands has been brought to the surface at least once in their past. One said, "I learned that one of my supervisors told my immediate supervisor not to hire me because I'm a female," she said. "He said he worried about me having sexual relations with my partner just because I'm a woman and he's a man. It doesn't work that way. He has since said he was glad the other supervisor

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ignored his advice.”

Similarly, another said she understood the concerns. “If I were a company owner, my only concern with hiring a woman in the field would be speed, quality and sexual lawsuits,” she said. “I would say it depends on the woman. If she does quality work and can avoid having sexual harassment charges filed against the company, I would absolutely hire a woman.”

Words spoken on the job by both female and male climbers can be a little colorful at times. All climbers, regardless of gender, will tell you that you had better have a thick skin, and you had better be able to dish it out as good as you take it; it’s the nature of the beast.

In the wireless infrastructure industry, as with other “alpha”

industries, female climbers would agree that tower climbers have to earn respect. In this industry’s environment, there is joking, kidding, and downright crude exchanges. The women interviewed expressed similar sentiments about it, such as, “I knew what I was getting myself into. If I couldn’t handle it, I wouldn’t be in the industry.”

Moreover, one female climber said, “Employers worry about women not being able to handle the joking and they worry about sexual harassment suits. Dear God, if they really knew what has been tossed around in jest, they might fall over dead. I dish it out as good as I take it daily, and I’ve never complained. It’s quite fun. I would say most employer concerns about throwing women in the mix

are invalid. All around, we’re able to handle it just fine.”

Another responded, “The truth about boys: Get a bunch of guys together isolated from anywhere they care about, and when they don’t think I’m within earshot, I hear things that make me wonder if I’ve been way off all along. It’s been disheartening at times. I try to keep it all in perspective and hope that it’s just the industry and not society as a whole. And yet, in that same scenario, sometimes I hear things that are pretty adorable.”

### Temperament and Attitude

Women offer an entire set of skills and attributes that is often overlooked and underappreciated — skills that make some employers skittish. Sen-

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sitivity and showing emotions and empathy are often categorized as traits that show weakness or liability, but when applied directly and effectively by women in this industry, these so-called liabilities translate into being able to effectively read people and to manage crews and dangerous situations. They translate into an ability to understand customer concerns more effectively.

From the responses gathered, it was apparent that all of the women love their jobs; most love their employers and their crews. One said, “The guys in my company respect me and still joke with me. I love them. Yeah, there are some chauvinists, but mostly everyone is amazing.”

Others responded with similar choruses about their crews, employers and coworkers being supportive. You are unlikely to ever find one of these women behind a desk. For these women, the interactions with their employers and crews; the physicality, and challenges and camaraderie of the job; and the hunger to learn more far outweigh the nuisances of a sideways comment from a crew member who hasn’t caught up to the 21st century.

### **Advice to Newcomers**

Without fail, the women interviewed had encouraging things to say about more women entering the industry, and with that encouragement came

some sage advice. Mainly, don’t whine, don’t complain, get out there and do it smarter, not harder, and the industry isn’t for the faint of heart.

One veteran climber expressively encapsulated the overall theme with this advice:

“Don’t expect this to be easy. It’s one of the most difficult and dangerous jobs in America and traditionally composed of males. Just as we don’t want to be generalized by the men, women shouldn’t generalize that all men are the same. You will encounter all kinds of men with a range of attitudes. Don’t let the males who are intimidated or upset about your presence discourage you.

“You may encounter sexual harassment and sexual discrimination. Don’t expect special treatment because of your gender. Expect to lift the same amount of weight, climb the same heights and go to the bushes to relieve yourself. You will get injuries, break fingernails, miss your families, work tremendously hard, work in some nasty weather and hear some crude and disgusting conversations.

“Just remember that once you get past the potential issues and demonstrate that you can do the job, you are doing something most men can’t even do. You will form lifelong bonds and friendships unlike any other.

“But never give up — it can and has been done.”

### **The Proverbial Glass Ceiling**

One woman I interviewed, a 15-year veteran in the industry, concisely and eloquently summed up the general consensus of most respondents on whether they believed there was a glass ceiling in the industry. “Absolutely not,” she said. “Look at Pat Cipov, chairwoman of the National Association of Tower Erectors. The only glass ceilings in this industry or in any aspect of your life are the ones that you set for yourself.”

One climber said she believed there is a glass ceiling regarding her pay, but she also described her experiences in a much more positive light by saying, “I’ve come a long way. I’ve learned a lot. I’ve surprised a lot of people. I’ve impressed a lot of people. And that feels awesome to anyone. I’ve had many foremen fight for me, and many tell me they think I’m the best top hand in the company. Top hands don’t generally work with other top hands, so I don’t know much about the others, but I’m taking their word for it.”

The existence of the proverbial glass ceiling has long been established by sociologists, and although there may in fact be one in the wireless infrastructure industry, it appears the women I interviewed probably won’t notice it when they crash through it.

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