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## Female owners of homebuilding companies remain a rarity

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Carmin Awadzi, chief executive of Wheaton-based Magnolia Custom Homes, got her start in building after taking a break from software development to oversee construction of a family home. (Andrew A. Nelles, Photo for the Chicago Tribune / November 21, 2013)

By Kari Richardson, Special to the Tribune

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Homebuilder Carmin Awadzi's client had a request. She wanted to include a basement room for rough-and-tumble play in her new home. Her five children needed a place to burn off energy in the winter on rolling trikes and zipping

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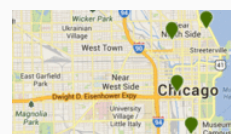
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For flooring material, the client suggested concrete.

"A male builder probably would have said, 'Yeah, I'll get you a price on that concrete,'" said Awadzi, chief executive of Wheaton-based Magnolia Custom Homes. But the builder, who is also mother to four children, wasn't comfortable with the combination of tiny tykes and unforgiving concrete. After some research, she found a maker of foam tiles used by day-care centers that would provide a soft place to land.

Awadzi is a rarity in the male-dominated field of homebuilding — a woman who owns her own building company.

In its 2007 survey of 93,500 builders, which included custom building firms as well as large-scale developer/builders, the National Association of Home Builders found that women owned 4.7 percent of companies. Another 22 percent of companies were owned by a partnership including at least one woman. The association plans to present updated survey results in 2014.

At a time when women make up more than half the class in many law-school, architecture and other professional programs, female homebuilders are puzzled as to why more women haven't joined their ranks. After all, the job description plays to female strengths: a detail-oriented multitasker, able to build relationships and manage people and projects.

Stephen Melman, director of economic services for the National Association of Home Builders, offers one plausible explanation: Sluggish sales and restricted access to capital have made it difficult for anyone, male or female, to become established in the construction industry during the last few years.

"When women might have wanted to pour into the industry, we've been in a deep recession," he said.

Those in the industry also point to the lack of female electricians, plumbers and carpenters, trades in which some men begin in homebuilding before hanging out a shingle.

Getting a start. Though Awadzi's grandfather was a small-scale builder, she began her career in software development. After her family relocated to the Chicago area several years ago, she decided to take a break from the corporate world to oversee the construction of a family home.

That project led to another, and another. She hasn't looked back.

As a veteran of the building process, Awadzi understands when clients pore over the details, taking two hours to pick the perfect doorknob, for example.

"Being a homebuilder is a little like being a wedding planner," she said. "Emotions run deep. Everything has to be perfect."

Other women get their start in family-owned firms. Lisa Pickell, daughter of the founder of Orren Pickell Building Group, grew up with a front-row seat to the construction industry. She spent summers working in architecture, sales and estimating for her family's firm.

After graduation from Miami University, Pickell took a job with a Columbus, Ohio, firm that does high-end renovations.

In her job as assistant project manager, she was charged with estimating project cost and managing construction crews. Some of the subcontractors she was overseeing had never worked with a woman before, period.

Valuable skills. On the job, Pickell quickly learned to tap experts for thorny questions and to value her crew. Her proudest moment came when, project complete, one of the toughest

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crew members pulled her aside to ask to work with her again.

Today, as chief operating officer for Northfield-based Orren Pickell Building Group, she oversees 23 employees —everyone except her father.

She is also part of the Professional Women in Building Council, launched recently by the Home Builders Association of Greater Chicago, to provide a forum for women to network and share perspectives. It includes female builders as well as women who work in related industries, such as architecture, marketing and home-product sales.

Pickell is the first to acknowledge that she entered a more progressive world than female builders encountered even a couple of decades ago.

Susanne Tauke, owner of New American Homes, began her firm in the late 1980s.

"I used to be the only woman at most closings —except for the buyer and seller," Tauke said. She recently was present at a closing where all of the professionals were female.

"Women are the ones who buy homes," Tauke said. It only makes sense that they have a hand in designing, marketing and building them, she explained.

Her current project is Newport Cove in Antioch, a 42-acre development with 67 lots and 1,800 feet of waterfront.

A flair for building. Jane Levy, president and owner of River Forest-based Levy Custom Homes, is also an industry veteran. She once thought she'd become a doctor, but an eye for reading blueprints and a knack for household mechanics soon had her on a different track.

When she launched her company in 1998, her goal was to make the homebuilding process enjoyable for clients. That means absorbing much of the stress herself. She's often awake at nights, walking through construction sites in her mind.

At 5 feet 4 inches, Levy grew up a tomboy, playing hockey and football with the neighborhood boys. Today, though, she brings distinctly female touches to her construction sites: tables loaded with snacks and indoor toilets for crews, for example.

But these thoughtful gestures don't substitute for industry know-how —and a thick skin. At an industry show she once attended, a male builder quizzed her about specifications for building part of the foundation.

"I said, 'The standard is 10 inches, but I like to do 12,'" she said. "It wasn't even a hard question."

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