Jean Surry, P.Eng., had a poster in her kitchen of a young girl fixing a bike with a caption that read: “I want to be an engineer like my mom.” Much to her surprise—and delight—her daughter is now in biomedical engineering.

“Perception is all,” says Surry, a consultant and adjunct professor, faculty of engineering science, University of Western Ontario. “If parents perceive that engineering means you’re out at a muddy construction site or down and dirty in a remote jungle somewhere, it’s not going to be something that they want their daughters doing. But really, most engineers don’t do that at all.”

Like most professions, engineering has many disciplines, offers versatile skills, opportunities for travel, and opportunities to work in large corporations or small start-ups. The stereotype that women can’t juggle family life and an engineering career still exists, she says, although the trials and tribulations are no different than a career in medicine or business.

An advocate for women in the field, Surry helped form a professional group for women engineers and architects in the London area to meet once a month or so to network and share ideas. She also sits on PEO’s Women in Engineering Advisory Committee (see

FACT BOX

Women represent about 51 per cent of the population in North America and 46 per cent of the labour force. That said, only 20 per cent of the continent’s engineering profession are female. In Ontario, only 6 per cent of professional engineers are women; across Canada, the number drops to 5.5 per cent. Women enrolling in engineering programs throughout North America make up only roughly 15 per cent of the student body. Despite affirmative action and gender equality legislation, such as the Pay Equity Act, effective in Ontario since 1988, the salary gap between male and female engineers in Ontario, for example, stands now at approximately 11.4 per cent.

Even in these enlightened times, the picture isn’t rosy for women in engineering. Men continue to outpace women in career advancement. The wage gap between men and women hasn’t narrowed much in the last decade. Enrolment of women into university engineering programs has levelled off after a boom period in the mid-1980s. And women still represent only a small percentage of faculty in the engineering and science fields. What’s the problem? There aren’t easy answers—despite a plethora of studies, surveys and conferences across North America. What’s being done about it? Plenty.
WEAC seeks parity for this and future generations

Harassment is professional misconduct if you’re a professional engineer, and PEO now has a Guideline on Human Rights in Professional Practice. The change in the wording of Regulation 541 of the Professional Engineers Act and publication of the guideline were major achievements for WEAC this past year, following their activism. The guideline was the result of a collaborative effort among a number of experts in the field, including representatives from the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia invited to talk about its efforts to include harassment in the definition of professional misconduct. Nancy Hill, P.Eng., a PEO advisory board member, says the guideline is a long overdue step forward for ensuring a harassment-free workplace. It also reflects the need for more training and education on harassment prevention, which is an ongoing challenge.

More than 10 years ago, PEO established WEAC to encourage the full participation of women in the engineering profession. Since its inception, WEAC has worked to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for women engineers, with a focus on increasing the number of women in engineering and supporting their professional development. WEAC’s mission is to ensure that the engineering profession is diverse, inclusive, and welcoming to women, and to promote the equal representation of women in engineering education, research, and practice.

WEAC seeks to achieve this goal by promoting diversity and inclusion in engineering education, facilitating networking opportunities, and advocating for policies and practices that support women engineers. WEAC also works to raise awareness of the challenges faced by women engineers and to promote gender equity in the engineering profession. The organization is committed to ensuring that women have equal access to opportunities in engineering and that their contributions are recognized and valued. WEAC is a valuable resource for women engineers, and its work is an important contribution to the advancement of diversity and inclusion in the engineering profession.