



Skills for Change

Building Welcoming and Equitable Communities

From Entry to Leadership

Women's Careers in the Skilled Trades

Learnings from Skills for Change's national *Women in Skilled Trades: Inclusive Pathways to Apprenticeship for Immigrant and Racialized Women* initiative.

Final Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Canada's construction and manufacturing related skilled trades stand at a crossroads. A national housing crisis, an aging workforce, and an accelerating green transition have created an urgent and historic demand for skilled labour, one that cannot be met without fundamentally rethinking who is suited for careers in these sectors and how we go about creating a more equitable and inclusive employment landscape. This report is the tenth and final in a series from Skills for Change's (SfC) Women in Skilled Trades: Inclusive Pathways to Apprenticeship for Immigrant and Racialized Women (WiST) initiative. It is an amalgamation of the previous nine reports with specific recommendations born from a national survey of women and employers, convenings in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia, and SfC's WiST Leadership Academy. Our aim with these reports has been to build a snapshot of what women, particularly newcomer and racialized, experience in and around Canada's construction and manufacturing skilled trades.

Women are not absent from the trades by choice or by incapacity. They are being kept out by informal hiring networks that reproduce exclusion, by worksites still designed as though women do not exist, by wages that undervalue their labour, by a lack of mentors and role models, and by

a funding environment that counts heads instead of measuring belonging. But employers, for their part, are not indifferent. They want to do more. Yet the speed of business, the scale of small companies, and the absence of structural supports leave intention without infrastructure. This is precisely where Canada's nonprofit sector, in partnership with governments and employers, is positioned to make a difference.

This report points to a clear shift in approach: from increasing participation to transforming conditions. Effective solutions require coordinated action across governments, employers, training delivery agents, and community organizations to build the infrastructure that supports equitable careers, not just entry points. This includes investing in mentorship and leadership pathways, embedding equity into workplace design and apprenticeship systems, and aligning training with both career progression and climate transition demands. Building a workforce that is inclusive, sustainable, and resilient will depend on whether the sector is willing to redesign itself, not around who has traditionally belonged but around what it needs to become.

Click on [Key Recommendations](#) to advance to the final section of the report.

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction.....	4
A Profile of Women in Canada’s Skilled Trades Sector.....	5
A Profile of Employers in Canada’s Skilled Trades Sector.....	9
Perceptions of the Skilled Trades.....	14
Experiences in the Skilled Trades.....	17
Workplace Culture: Safety Issues, Cultural Barriers, & Policy Gaps.....	20
Employers’ Practices in the Skilled Trades.....	25
Convening and Connecting.....	32
Networking and Advancing.....	39
The Green Turn.....	43
What Does this All Mean?.....	51
References.....	55

INTRODUCTION



In 2019, the Government of Canada launched the Canadian Apprenticeship Strategy (CAS), a funding program aimed at increasing the visibility of career pathways in the skilled trades while tackling barriers for entry into the sector for equity-deserving groups. A women-focused initiative under the CAS was launched in 2022 for projects that would improve the recruitment, retention, and success of women apprentices in the skilled trades. One of the explicit objectives of this initiative is “creating a welcoming space where women can feel comfortable and safe in the training and work sites.”¹

Skills for Change (SfC) responded, and through our Women in Skilled Trades: Inclusive Pathways to Apprenticeship for Immigrant and Racialized Women (WiST) program, we are working with women, employers, unions, and trainers across the country to build a stronger, more equitable construction and manufacturing skilled trades sector. Our convenings in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia foster critical dialogue, develop new networks, and advance understanding of the issues women face in skilled trades careers. The WiST Leadership Academy provides mentorship, career guidance, and leadership training to help women advance their career aspirations.

And, we have conducted a national survey² of women and employers to gather insights into women’s perceptions about careers in the skilled trades, experiences of women already in a skilled trades career, and employer practices that support women’s careers and advancement. And through all these activities, this project looks ahead to the future of skilled trades and emerging pathways in environmentally sustainable practice.

This is the tenth and final report of this project, which collates the insights and recommendations from the previous nine reports. What emerges is a compelling story: women are not only actively participating in the skilled trades, but more are eager to join. Yet there remains much work to be done to ensure women can not only enter the trades and thrive in their careers but be safe doing so.

All of our reports, as well as our full suite of programs and services for women including mental health supports for those experiencing discrimination or violence at home or in the workplace, are available on our website.

A PROFILE OF WOMEN IN CANADA'S SKILLED TRADES SECTOR



Since the launch of the CAS in 2019, the need for skilled trades³ workers has only increased. A national housing crisis and an aging workforce are driving an urgent demand for labour. Canada faces a severe housing shortage, with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) estimating that 4.8 million new housing units need to be constructed by 2035 to meet projected demand.⁴ The shortage is exacerbated by restrictive zoning and land-use policies, an aging skilled trades workforce, and insufficient apprenticeship and training programs.^{5,6} Over 700,000 skilled trades workers are projected to retire by 2030,^{7,8,9} with construction alone needing over 300,000 new workers.¹⁰ To address these issues, governments have committed to doubling the pace of housing construction, including traditional methods and new technologies, which means Canada must hire and train thousands of new skilled tradespeople.¹¹ With these myriad pressures continuing to compound, Canada is in crisis.

There is, however, a solution.

Women are drastically underrepresented in the skilled trades, accounting for just 13.7% of apprentices—a number that is even lower for immigrant and racialized women. Creating better conditions for women to enter into and remain in the

trades is paramount for both addressing the labour shortage and sustaining Canada's economy.

Women are significantly underrepresented in Canadian skilled trades occupations. In 2024, only 7.9% of workers in trades, transport, and equipment operator occupations were women.¹² And in the construction and manufacturing skilled trades sector, men make up 87% of workers.¹³ There are many reasons why this gendered disparity continues to persist from a lack of gender-appropriate facilities and properly sized personal protective equipment (PPE) to compounding issues like language and cultural differences experienced by many newcomers.

Nonetheless, there has been a growing interest among women in entering the trades, supported by collaborative efforts across governments, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and industry partners. In 2023, 12,117 women registered as new apprentices, marking a 17.9% increase from the previous year, with the strongest growth observed among younger generations.¹⁴ Of these new apprentices:

- 16.7% were under 20 years old
- 25.6% were 20-24
- 17.5% were 25-29
- 14.1% were 30-34

And the under-20 age group showed the largest year-over-year increase of over 24%.¹⁵

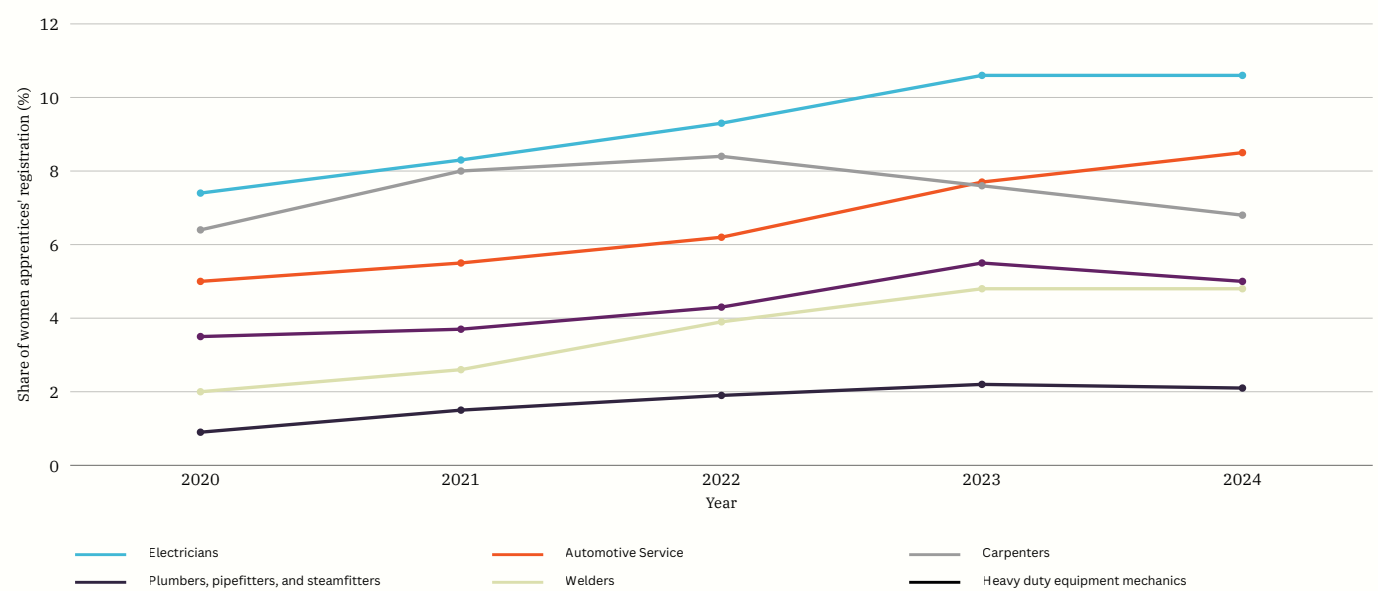
Trade specialization patterns also reveal persistent gender segmentation. While men, who primarily pursue Red Seal specializations like electrician, plumber, automotive service technicians, and carpenters, women’s participation remains disproportionately clustered in traditionally “women-friendly” trades. Nearly one in three women apprentices registered in hairstylist and esthetician (21% in 2024 and 2023; 22% in 2022) or food services trades (15% in 2024 and 2023; 17% in 2022).¹⁶ These sectors are historically women-dominated, with women comprising approximately 85% of the workforce.¹⁷

However, women apprentices are entering the male-dominated trades at increasing rates. In 2020, 5% of new apprentices in automotive were women, rising to 8.5% in 2024. Plumbing also is seeing an increase from 3.5% new women apprentices in 2020

to 5% four years later, peaking at 5.5% in 2023.¹⁸ And electrician has emerged as the third most common trade choice among women apprentices in the traditionally male-dominated trades, with 1,386 women newly registered in 2024, representing 25.7% of all women electrician apprentices and 10.6% of new women apprentices overall.¹⁹

Women from the Survey

Our survey paints a vivid picture of just some of the women who are shaping the skilled trades. Respondents make up a diverse cohort and have a broad range of educational backgrounds. The majority are 35–39 years of age (21%), newcomers (25%), members of a racialized group (30%), and/or Indigenous (13%), with a minimum of a high school diploma or equivalent (39%).



Growing Share of Women Choosing Male-Dominated Skilled Trades, 2020–2024²⁰

There is an almost even split between women currently employed in (121) and those interested in working (135) in the trades. Among those currently employed the majority (31%) are 35-39 years of age with a college diploma (58%) or high school diploma or equivalent (47%).

Most respondents who are already in the trades are apprentices (64%). 6% are pre-apprentices, and a significant 31% are already Red Seal certified, a group of mostly 35-39 year-old (41%), non-racialized women (36%), but with Indigenous women of the same age group well represented at 36%. However, newcomer and racialized women also figure prominently in our pool overall.

Pre-apprentices

- 29% are newcomers
- 43% are racialized women

Apprentices

- 15% are newcomers
- 22% are racialized women

Of the 135 women interested in working in the trades:

- 7% are from 2SLGBTQIA+ communities
- 37% are racialized
- 4% are Indigenous
- 48% are newcomers

The two largest groups by age, at 19%, are 20-24 (28% of whom have a high school diploma or equivalent) and 30-34 (with 56% having a bachelor's degree).

What Lies Ahead

A major focus for many government-led skilled trades strategies aimed at women is creating more training opportunities and job placements. But there is more to work and career than just training and placement. Key to understanding how to support government priorities, employers, and women themselves is understanding perceptions of the workplace. In our survey, about 3 in 5 respondents interested in a trades career named sexism as a fundamental barrier that they expect to encounter. But there are several issues that these women are thinking about as they consider their career pathways.

- Racism
- Lack of support from employers for family obligations
- Lack of information or awareness
- Lack of training opportunities
- The job might be too physically demanding
- Worried training will be too expensive or time consuming



Why are these Figures Important?

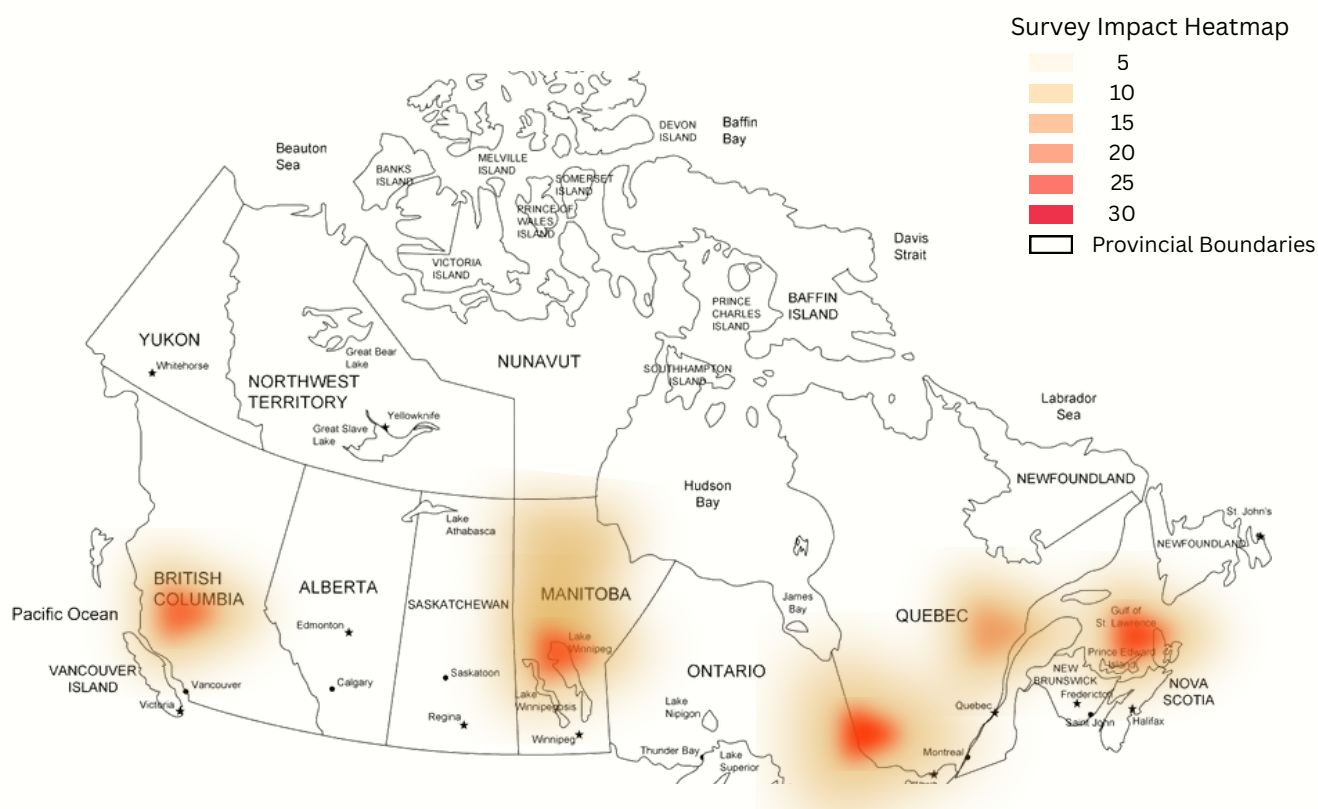
The statistics above are more than just numbers. They represent a diverse range of women who are, or are interested in, pursuing a career that remains one of the most male-dominated sectors in Canada.^{21,22}

And they expose both the scale of women's ambition and the systemic barriers that continue to hold the sector back. If Canada is serious about solving its labour shortage, improving safety, and building an economy that works for everyone, then supporting women in the trades isn't optional. It's the lever that changes everything.

A PROFILE OF EMPLOYERS IN CANADA'S SKILLED TRADES SECTOR

Employers are, of course, a vital part of any solution to labour issues. In the construction and manufacturing sectors, there are over 150,000 businesses across Canada that employ over 3.3 million workers, representing almost 16% of the national GDP.^{23,24,25} And where government strategies prioritize training to bring more people into skilled trades occupations, employers play a dual role in supporting apprentices as part of that entry strategy while also helping to ensure career longevity and employee retention.

Through the WiST advisory committee and during discussions at events across the country, there was much discussion about the ongoing challenges employers face in recruiting and retaining women in the trades. Many employers are aware of “best practices,” including gender-inclusive recruitment, mentorship supports, career advancement, and networking supports that can strengthen hiring outcomes, job



Survey Response Heatmap (Employers) - Canada

Areas with survey responses (FSA-level), 2025, N=165 respondents

Source: Skills for Change, National Project: Women in Skilled Trades, Survey of Employer, 2025.

Note: Heat intensity represents approximate concentration of survey responses at the FSA (3-digit postal code) level, not individual addresses.

satisfaction, and long-term retention for women. But they often lack the tools, capacity, and resources needed to drive deeper, systemic change. While they acknowledge that progress remains uneven, they are committed to being more inclusive and supportive.

Employers from the Survey

Our survey gives us a quick look at part of the sector’s operational landscape. A total of 165 employers responded from Ontario (25%), Nova Scotia (24%), Manitoba (18%), British Columbia (17%), and Quebec (16%).

We asked employers questions about two key areas of their operations to better understand where they can focus their efforts to not only attract but also be better at retaining women:

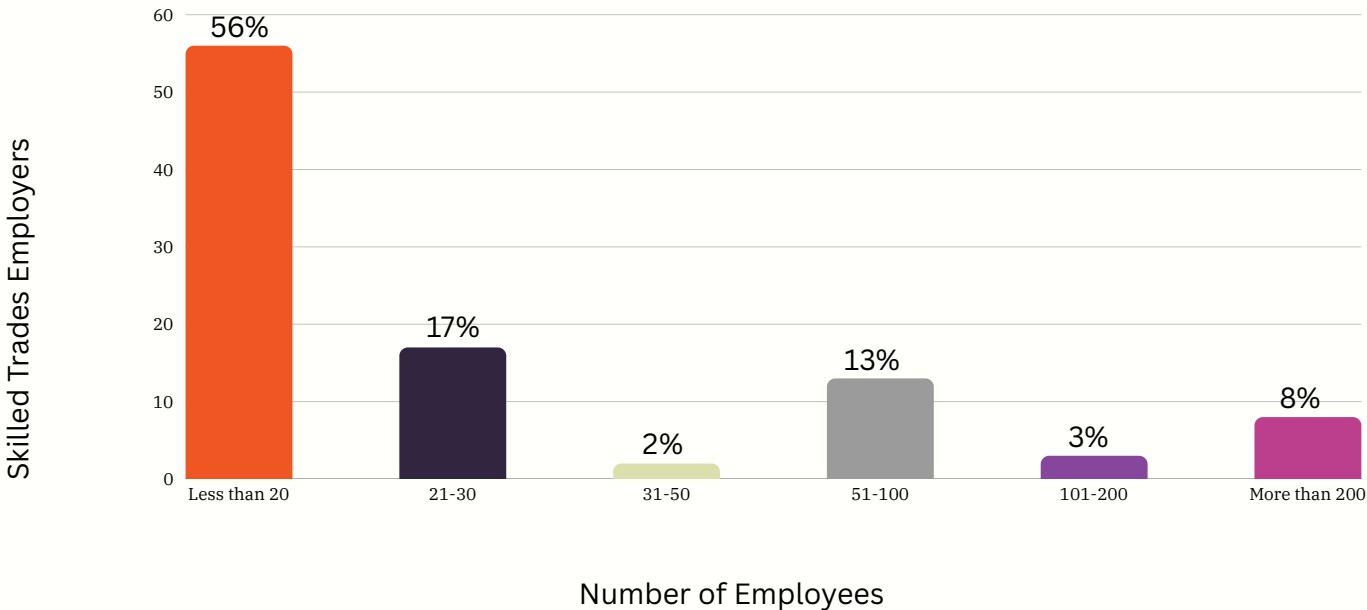
- Hiring and retention practices
- Support for career advancement and networking

What we can see is that while overall there is a desire to do more to support

women, it’s much more complicated than simply providing training and job placements.

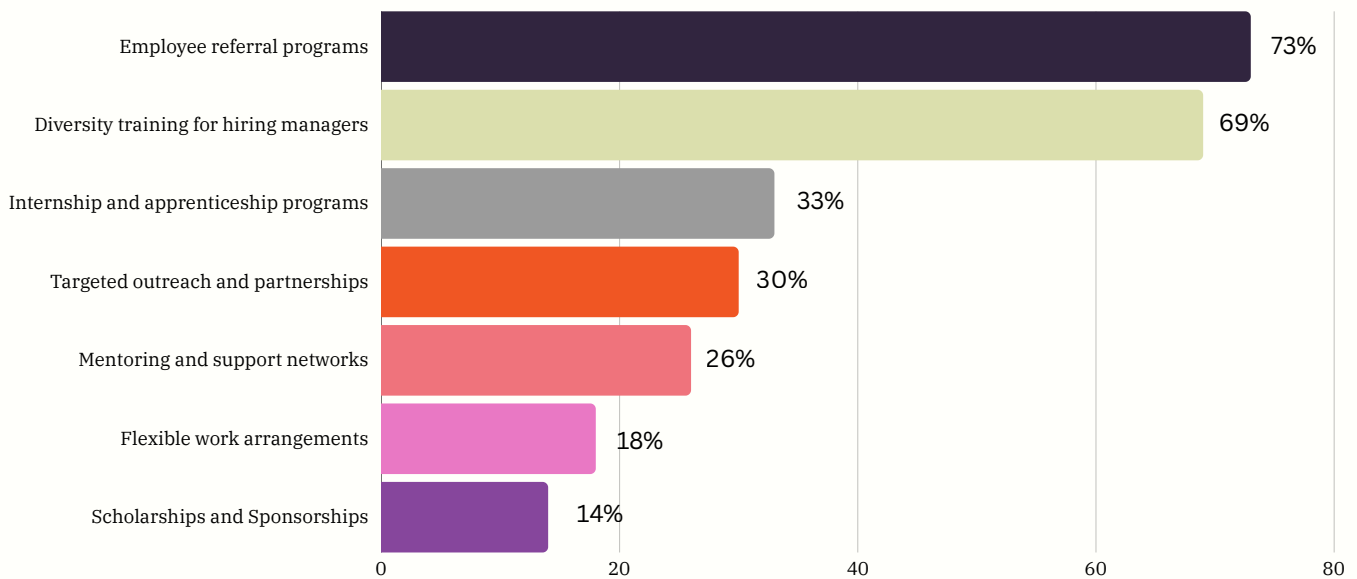
Knowing that small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are a major employer in the sector, our survey was more granular in terms of the size of company than most other reports. And yet it might still be surprising that 56% of our respondents have fewer than 20 employees. This can be important when thinking about the capacity of employers to hire apprentices of any gender and the culture of a given workplace.

Earlier, we identified some perceived barriers that women interested in a career in trades think they might encounter, including sexism and racism. In work environments with smaller teams, this can mean that negative workplace dynamics might be difficult to evade. And in the context of apprenticeships, in certain trades an employer is required to have a 1:1 journeyperson-to-apprentice ratio,²⁶ limiting the number of new apprentices they can hire and train.



Making the Pitch

When asked what strategies employers use to recruit women, especially racialized and immigrant women, respondents showed a range of approaches.



These responses tell us two things: there indeed are employers that are working to diversify their workforce—and the work they are doing needs to be amplified—but others are not yet following suit. This could be for several reasons such as establishing connections with communities not yet in your network is difficult work. Where do you start?

This is where partnerships between employers and community-based organizations are essential.

Hiring in the trades often happens through informal networks,^{27,28} and in a sector so heavily populated by men this raises questions about the ability of women to find

entry points into the sector.

But are skilled trades employers really in a position to be able to hold networking events and advancing this kind of support?

It has been challenging to provide the time for employees to engage in formal and organized networking opportunities as there is always work to do and prioritize in addition to location challenges where these opportunities occur.

We want to create networking opportunities for all our staff, not just the women, but with crews spread across job sites and deadlines always looming, formal events just aren't practical right now.

We'd like to help women build networks, but honestly, between tight schedules and remote job sites, organizing formal events just isn't realistic for us.

Without sufficient access to networks, women can be left with a lack of role models and mentors. And although the trades have a built-in mentorship-style structure via apprenticeship, 87% of employers stated that they do not provide specific leadership training or mentorship programs.

We are a small, growing company and do not have enough funds to provide leadership and/or mentorship programs, let alone specifically for women.

I am unsure if my company provides opportunities for leadership training that are specifically designed for women in trades, but I think it would be helpful in bringing more women into trades.

We have some workshops and such. These could be better.

And while government strategies focus heavily on pathways for women into the skilled trades, which help to address the sector's heavy reliance on informal networks, ensuring that women stay in the trades needs different, and in some ways more focused, attention. One important way of encouraging women to remain in the trades is supporting their career advancement. However, 65% of employers in our survey do not provide opportunities to learn about career advancement to any employees, let alone opportunities tailored for women. With that said, there are reasons why employers might not be able to do so.

We'd love to offer career advancement training, but as a small company, we simply don't have the resources or dedicated staff to make it happen.

Providing structured training is costly, and right now we can't afford to take on that expense without external support.

We'd like to offer advancement training, but as a small team with limited resources, it's just not feasible.

We know, though, that many employers are also committed to figuring out how they can better support women.

I think it's beneficial that my organization provides opportunities to learn about career advancement because it is so important, especially as a woman, to know how far you can go with a certain company [and] also what limitations there may be.

We are looking into partnership opportunities to make [leadership and/or mentorship programs] a reality. I strongly believe delivering training and programs would definitely help retain our women employees and bring more women into our organization.

We know supporting women's advancement is critical, and we're trying to figure out what works for our size and resources. It's a learning process, but we're committed to making it happen.

And it's to these employers that the rest of the sector can learn how to better address their own needs in recruiting and retaining a skilled labour force and subsequently better contribute to Canada's economy.

Why are these Narratives Important?

Employers are telling us that they want to attract and support women in joining the

trades and having long, successful careers. But they're also telling us that the speed of business doesn't typically allow for this. Realistically, how much time can employers carve out of the workday when they have deadlines and deliverables to meet in order to run their business?

This is where Canada's nonprofit sector plays a vital role. In partnering with employers, and bringing government into these partnerships, nonprofits are uniquely positioned to help employers create supports for women's entry into, and retention in, the skilled trades.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SKILLED TRADES



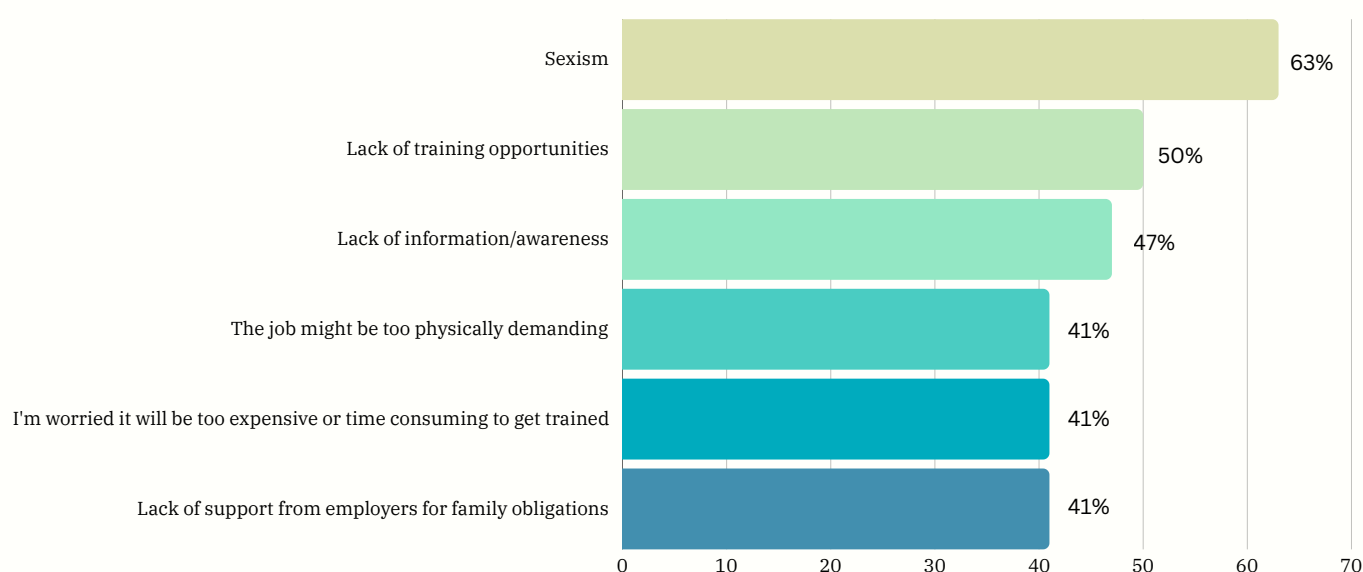
The WiST national survey focused on two groups of women: those that are already in the skilled trades, and those that are interested in a career in the skilled trades. Understanding what women think they'll encounter, potentially dissuading them from pursuing skilled trades careers, is essential for not only bettering the sector's reputation but for creating meaningful, systemic change in the workplace.

Women from our survey who are interested in a trades career (n=135) have one fundamental perceived barrier: sexism (63%). But they also worry about a lack of training opportunities (50%) and say they have a lack of information or awareness about the trades as a career pathway (47%).

As well, 100% of Indigenous and 44% of racialized women said they expect to encounter racism in the workplace.

Understanding the perceptions of specific groups of women can help guide the development of more tailored programs and services to support women's entry into the skilled trades sector.

- Ages 15-19 (n=6): sexism (100%), lack of support from employers for family obligations (80%), lack of training opportunities (40%)
- Ages 20-24 (n=25): sexism (71%), lack of training opportunities (52%), lack of information/awareness (48%)



Perceived barriers of Women interested in a trades career.

- Indigenous women (n=6): racism (100%), lack of support from employers for family obligations (80%), sexism (20%), I'm worried it will be too expensive or time consuming (20%)
- Racialized women (n=50): sexism (79%), lack of information/awareness (56%), lack of training opportunities (47%), racism (44%)
- Newcomer women (n=65): sexism (65%), lack of information/awareness (54%), lack of training opportunities (54%), racism (28%)

Knowing there's a welcoming community and clear paths to learn without hidden barriers would make me feel confident to jump in.

I'd need to see more women of colour in leadership.

Fairness and respect on the job are critical, alongside clear paths for advancement.

Knowing I'll be valued and can grow is what would truly get me all in.

Strong mentorship would really help me take the next step.

Supportive mentorship, especially other women in the field, and clear information about the different paths I can take.

Seeing more representation and knowing there's a strong community behind me would boost my confidence.

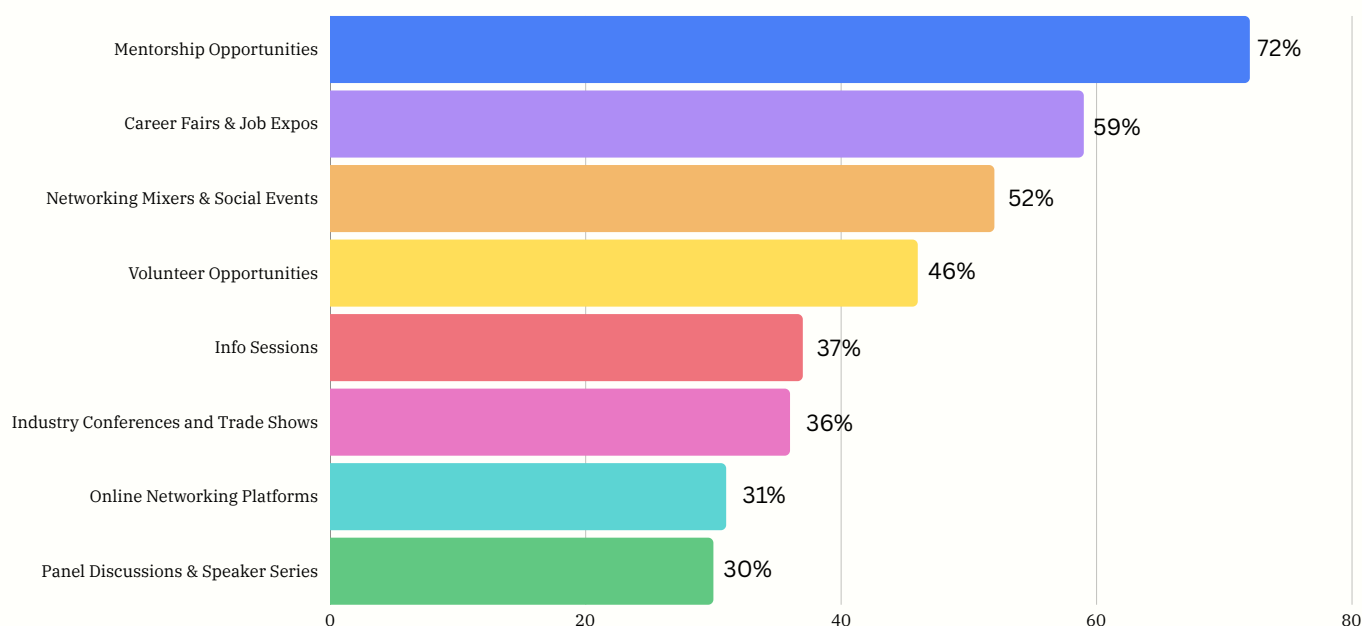
I want to be part of a field where I can grow and make a difference.

Ways In

Despite both practical and systemic hurdles, we heard that there are things that would help influence women to enter the skilled trades sector.

The chance to keep learning new skills and possibly teach others in the future.

Seeing other women of color succeed in [the] trades would really inspire me.



Learning, representation, mentorship, and community. How can the skilled trades show where women entering the field can find these things?

As part of our series of WIST events, Skills for Change offered Initiatives like mentorship opportunities, career fairs and expos, networking mixers, and other social events. We saw first-hand that providing opportunities for women thinking of entering the trades to connect with women already established in the sector is a vital part of any initiative seeking to open pathways.

However, even the best program or event needs to generate a lot of attention, and knowing how to reach women to promote skilled trades careers takes effort. Only 27% of women we surveyed who are interested in a skilled trades career said they are “very aware” of opportunities. While another 50% are “somewhat aware,” these numbers tell us that there is much more work to be done on showing women that there are viable career pathways for them in the skilled trades sector.

Why are these Perceptions Important?

These data show that there is a motivated and diverse pool of talent who view the trades as a pathway to a secure, stable, and meaningful career in Canada. However, it’s easy to see that women still have some negative expectations of the skilled trades workplace. The persistent fears of sexism and racism are perhaps not surprising, but remain very serious issues to address.

One way to shift these perceptions is by increasing the visibility of women in

leadership positions, something many women responding to our survey identified. This requires funders, employers, unions, training delivery agents, and workforce development agencies to collaborate on practical training opportunities that not only bring women into the sector but support their advancement. If more women are seen leading, not only will this attract more women to the trades but it will fundamentally shift the power dynamics in the workplace so that women feel safe and are able to build fulfilling careers.

EXPERIENCES IN THE SKILLED TRADES

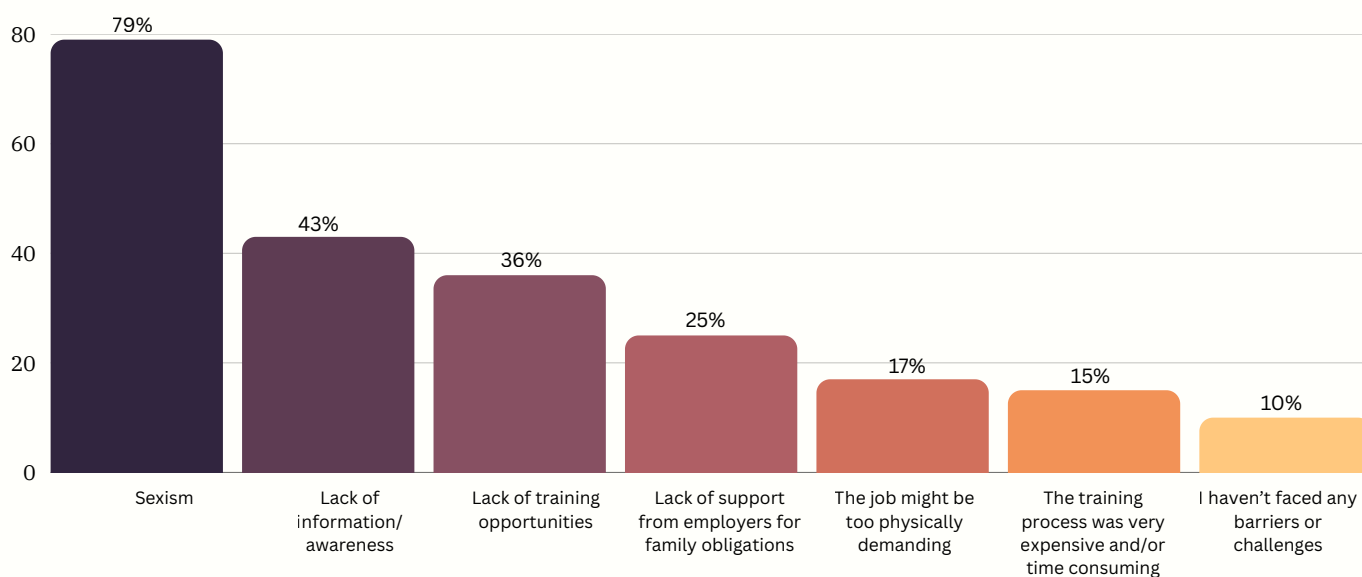


At present, women only make up 13% of skilled trades workers in Canada's construction and manufacturing sectors,²⁹ and only 2.4% of those are from racialized communities.³⁰ This means there are few role models that women can look to and suggests that systemic barriers that fall along lines of gender and race remain high. While many initiatives have emerged across the country to increase the number of women in and the racial diversity of the skilled trades sector, including our own national project, addressing the number of workers and demographic representation is only the first step. What women experience in the workplace can be the difference between staying or leaving the sector altogether.

In looking at our survey data, we asked the question: how do perceptions align with the experiences of women already in skilled trades careers?

We heard about many experiences from women in the trades about difficult and even outrageous experiences of racism, sexism, misogyny, and other means of harassment and exclusion. Of the 121 respondents currently working in the trades:

- 79% have experienced sexism
- 43% have or have had a lack of information and awareness about opportunities in the trades
- 36% say they have had a lack of training opportunities



Earlier, we noted that 100% of Indigenous and 44% of racialized women respondents interested in a career in the skilled trades expect to encounter racism in the workplace. The reality for those already working in the trades shows some differences—but not always in positive ways. While only 6% of Indigenous women reported having experienced racism on the job, 59% of non-Indigenous racialized women currently working in the trades reported experiencing racism, an even higher rate than women from this same group anticipate they will experience in the skilled trades workplace.

As well, women in these groups have experienced sexism at rates of 72% and 95%, respectively. But destabilizing the structures that perpetuate racism and sexism is not done by simply separating Indigenous and non-Indigenous racialized women. Sexism and racism have many different intersections.³¹ How sexism is expressed gets shaped by the type of racism informing it, and the ways that racism manifests are also shaped by the sexist tropes and stereotypes that continue to be imposed on different communities. And the ways that racism and sexism manifest are also informed by perceptions of ability, ethnicity, socio-economic class, religion, and many other social categories.³²

The need for intersectional strategies that address both sexism and racism persists. And ensuring that equity efforts reflect the lived realities of Indigenous and racialized women from different communities requires a deeply nuanced approach.

Calling Out

We invited women to share some of their experiences in the skilled trades workplace to illustrate how issues like sexism appear day to day.

Companies, right off the bat, DO NOT want to hire women. Doesn't matter whether they completed a pre-apprenticeship or college degree.

Not being placed to do certain tasks because they think it would be too hard for me to do.

Not taken seriously. Being questioned on decisions. Being told that I am too aggressive rather than assertive. Being told that I am distracting others on the work site.

I didn't get proper fitting PPE.

Lack of support during the days of the month when I don't perform my best due to cramps.

I was terminated from my job and placed on a site ban list by my employer after filing a formal harassment complaint for being stalked and videotaped in the women's washroom and changeroom at a work site. I was the first woman to work as a heavy equipment technician.

In many parts of the country, employers are required to have anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies, but formal training for workers is rarely mandatory. This means that while there may be mechanisms in place to address issues after an incident (although often insufficient³³), these measures

neither prevent harassment and discrimination nor educate colleagues, supervisors, or leaders.

Evidence shows that many existing policies are ineffective. Some key weaknesses are:

- Policies often lack clarity, fail to address cultural norms, and are not accompanied by meaningful enforcement or education.³⁴
- Traditional approaches to harassment prevention, which are primarily for legal compliance, do not alter workplace attitudes or behaviours.³⁵
- Policies often fail because they do not address power imbalances or reporting barriers.³⁶

Effective strategies require integrating policies with comprehensive training, accountability mechanisms, and cultural transformation initiatives.

Why are these Experiences Important?

We can see that the expectations of women considering a career in the trades is closely aligned with the realities of women already working in the sector. Their stories and experiences remind us that there is a persistent threat of sexism for women that is amplified by racism and a lack of various supports. And yet, as we have already seen, there are employers that are eager to support women and dismantle systemic barriers.

Attracting women to the skilled trades and increasing their numbers in the workplace is not enough. A radical transformation is needed, with the prevention of harassment

and discrimination as well as actionable policies that hold people accountable at the core. Deeper research and collaborative programming are needed to develop the tools and processes for creating cultural transformation leading to systemic change.

WORKPLACE CULTURE: SAFETY ISSUES, CULTURAL BARRIERS, & POLICY GAPS



Thus far, we've provided an overview of who survey respondents are and some of the issues they identified as problem areas for the skilled trades sector. In this section, we continue to center the discussion on what we heard from the survey, while also taking a step back to provide a broader review of issues identified in other projects and research initiatives. As such, what comes next provides a more narrative account that allows us to describe in greater detail the sector's pain points and opportunities for systems-level change.

Despite growing national attention to equity, diversity, and inclusion, workplace realities continue to be exclusionary, especially for racialized and immigrant women. Their experiences and expectations shared via our survey illuminated major entry barriers, but as we have looked to other sources of information and data, broader systemic challenges—deeply rooted in worksite culture, institutional design, and policy frameworks—remain unaddressed. Literature and policy evidence point to persistent problems of safety, informality, lack of accommodation, and gendered expectations that shape women's daily experiences in trades workplaces. These issues are reinforced by a funding environment that rewards individual job hire numbers over structural change, sustaining inequities even in well-intentioned programs.

Persistent Safety and Cultural Barriers

The skilled trades remain one of the most gender-segregated sectors of the labour market. Decades of advocacy have not yet transformed entrenched “macho” cultures that prize toughness, physical endurance, and competitiveness over collaboration and safety.³⁷ Studies from Canada and abroad reveal that women frequently experience verbal harassment, inappropriate comments, and sometimes physical intimidation at work.^{38,39} Fear of retaliation often prevents reporting, reinforcing a cycle in which hostility is normalized. Such cultures are sustained through informal hiring and advancement systems like word-of-mouth referrals, male-dominated union networks, and long-standing social ties, which reproduces isolation and even exclusion. Trades employers frequently hire within their own networks, limiting access for women and newcomers.⁴⁰ These informal systems effectively decide who is seen as “fit” for the trades, shaping access to apprenticeships, mentorship, and leadership roles. International evidence mirrors this pattern, with women describing “macho” apprenticeship settings characterized by bullying and exclusion.^{41,42}

Safety, therefore, extends beyond physical hazards to include psychological and social well-being. When harassment, job insecurity, and isolation combine, women often exit before completing certification. In Canada, only 34% of women completed apprenticeships in the 15 largest programs in 2021, compared with 47% of men—a gap not explained by interest or aptitude.⁴³

Inadequate Environments and Policy Gaps

Material and policy design in the trades continues to signal that women are outsiders. Worksites often lack gender-appropriate infrastructure, such as separate washrooms and changing areas, while personal protective equipment is frequently sized for male bodies, creating discomfort and safety risks.⁴⁴ These gaps communicate exclusion at both a symbolic and practical level. Beyond infrastructure, limited access to benefits, maternity leave, and childcare forces women to choose between family responsibilities and career advancement. The cost of training programs, tools, and safety equipment adds to the burden, particularly for newcomers balancing settlement expenses or single-parent households.^{45,46} Where accommodations exist, they are inconsistently implemented, and enforcement of anti-discrimination laws remains weak.⁴⁷ Insufficient data collection on newcomer and racialized women's retention and outcomes in trades programs further obscures these inequities, impeding targeted policy interventions.

The cumulative result is a work environment that fails to integrate gender equity into its core operations. Even supportive employers often rely on informal commitments or

individual champions rather than systemic change. And so, without clear standards, accountability frameworks, or other tools, barriers remain.

Gendered Expectations and Everyday Bias

The cultural construction of the “ideal tradesperson” remains deeply gendered. Physical strength, endurance, and emotional stoicism continue to define competence, while collaboration and communication—skills often emphasized by women—are undervalued. Women entering trades report pressure to “fit in” by adopting masculine behaviours, and those who do not conform risk marginalization or being relegated to less visible tasks. As a result, women are often assigned repetitive or low-responsibility duties that offer little opportunity for advancement.^{48,49} One survey respondent shared experiences of “not being placed to do certain tasks because [managers/employers] think it would be too hard for me to do.”⁵⁰ These expectations feed directly into wage inequality.

Across Canada, women in trades earn roughly 46% of men's wages after certification.⁵¹ More than 80% of women in all skilled trades (not just construction and manufacturing-related trades) work in low-income fields like hairstyling and cooking (often referred to as the women-dominated specializations), and it is in these specific trades that the pay gap between women and men is most pronounced.⁵² For example, women, 8 years after certification, earn on average \$27,000 to \$41,000, while men in the same women-dominated trades earn between \$36,000 and \$51,000.⁵³

At the same time, sectors like construction tend to maintain persistent wage discrimination.⁵⁴ These dynamics reinforce gender hierarchies within the sector and discourage long-term participation.

Intersectional Inequities for Racialized and Immigrant Women

Race and migration status further shape workplace experiences. Racialized and immigrant women face compounded barriers including language differences and racial bias. As we noted earlier, the skilled trades often rely on informal networks, which intensifies disadvantages: when apprentice sponsorship depends on existing social networks, newcomers lacking local contacts struggle to progress from pre-apprenticeship to registered apprenticeship. One national evaluation study found that 79% of pre-apprentices wished to continue training, yet 64% could not find a sponsor.⁵⁵

Structural factors magnify these inequities. Colleges and unions, which serve as group sponsors, face lengthy waitlists, with flagship programs such as electrical construction or HVAC having delays of up to two years.^{56,57} Small and medium-sized employers—the backbone of Canada’s apprenticeship system—often cannot absorb the cost of training a four-year apprentice, even with available grants and tax credits.⁵⁸ For example, the average cost for a single four-year construction electrician apprenticeship in Canada is estimated at approximately \$275,000, more than triple the cost faced by employers in Germany.⁵⁹ Limited administrative capacity and fears of losing trained apprentices to larger firms further reduce sponsorship willingness.

These barriers are not simply economic; they also reflect systemic undervaluing of racialized and immigrant women’s labour. Research on migration shows that skilled women who move internationally often face deskilling and wage penalties in host economies.⁶⁰ Within Canada, similar dynamics occur when immigrant tradeswomen are channelled into precarious, short-term roles without benefits or progression. While evidence shows that certified trades training yields the strongest income gains for newcomers, lowering the likelihood of low-income status seven years after arrival, participation rates remain exceptionally low at 1.5% compared with 15% for other postsecondary programs.⁶¹

The Green Transition as a Missed Opportunity

Skills for Change also works in the environmental sustainability space. As such, we were curious about the intersections between climate action and skilled trades. Canada’s transition toward a low-carbon economy and other climate-related initiatives could be a powerful catalyst for re-designing workplace norms and attracting women to the construction and manufacturing skilled trades. Tradespeople are indeed central to green infrastructure, from retrofits and renewable-energy systems to electric-vehicle manufacturing. Yet the “green” technology sectors largely replicate existing inequities. Women account for only 28.6% of the environmental and clean-technology workforce, with even lower representation in technical or leadership roles.⁶² Women who identify as Indigenous, racialized, or immigrants face compounded intersectional barriers, including even lower representation in the sector and persistent

pay gaps compared to their male counterparts.⁶³ Without deliberate inclusion strategies, the clean-energy boom risks reinforcing gender and racial hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

WIST's survey introduced a climate-justice component, linking sustainability values with women's motivations for entering the trades. This shift reflects growing recognition that women's environmental engagement can be leveraged as an entry point for inclusive participation.⁶⁴ However, for this potential to materialize, climate-aligned training needs to be paired with inclusive employment standards.⁶⁵ If low-carbon job sites replicate old hierarchies, the green transition will remain socially exclusive even as it becomes technologically progressive.⁶⁶

From Counting Women to Changing Workplaces

Addressing workplace issues in the skilled trades requires moving beyond representation to transformation. Policy interventions and program design should target the structural conditions that reproduce inequity rather than merely expanding participation, as participation does not equal inclusion.⁶⁷ This entails embedding intersectional analysis into all levels of practice—training, hiring, supervision, and evaluation—and accountability beyond job hire numbers and productivity. As such, workplace safety needs to encompass psychological well-being and cultural respect. Integrating harassment prevention and fair task distribution into health and safety audits ensures that relational and cultural harms are treated with the same institutional seriousness as physical ones. Designing

infrastructure and PPE standards that attend to gender-specific needs as essential safety criteria, not optional accommodations, removes structural barriers that signal whose bodies and experiences the workplace was built for. Furthermore, apprenticeship sponsorship models that use pooled or consortium approaches distribute financial risk across multiple employers, allowing small firms to participate without bearing disproportionate costs.⁶⁸ Such systems-level interventions will create the scaffolding for a more equitable and human-centred skilled trades ecosystem.

Equally crucial is the redefinition of success indicators. Programs need to evolve from counting participants to valuing experience. Qualitative measures—workers' sense of belonging, perceived respect, and access to advancement—are complements to traditional metrics that speak to the experiential and can be good indicators of strong retention and career growth. Bringing evaluation closer to methodologies that emphasize reflexivity, relationality, and structural critique is part of creating a more accountable system.⁶⁹ Equally crucial is the redefinition of success indicators. Programs need to evolve from counting participants to valuing experience. Qualitative measures—workers' sense of belonging, perceived respect, and access to advancement—are complements to traditional metrics that speak to the experiential and can be good indicators of strong retention and career growth. Bringing evaluation closer to methodologies that emphasize reflexivity, relationality, and structural critique is part of creating a more accountable system.

Toward Transformative Inclusion

Workplace issues in the skilled trades are not merely individual experiences of bias or discomfort; they are manifestations of structural power relations embedded in economic and policy systems. Merely counting women without transforming conditions, risks reproducing the inequities programs like WiST seek to solve. The task ahead is therefore about redefining what counts as success, safety, and skill. True inclusion means ensuring that every measure of progress—productivity, safety, training quality—reflects care, dignity, and equity. It means that newcomer and racialized women are not simply inserted into existing frameworks but participate in reshaping them. When programs, employers, and policymakers adopt this lens, safety becomes cultural as much as procedural, and diversity becomes a shared standard rather than an aspirational slogan. In this sense, the future of equity in skilled trades depends on the transformation of the workplaces that await them. Only by embedding equity principles into the everyday practices of training, supervision, and governance can Canada's skilled trades evolve from sites of exclusion into spaces of belonging and shared prosperity.

EMPLOYERS' PRACTICES IN THE SKILLED TRADES



From Aspiration to Attrition Risk

In our national survey, we had a larger proportion of newcomer and racialized women respondents interested in skilled trades careers than are in the construction and manufacturing sectors in Canada (31% and 27% respectively). And 77% of these respondents said they are somewhat or very aware of the career pathways in the skilled trades, with some also telling us that they view the trades as a path to financial stability and hands-on, fulfilling work. In the own words of some of these women:

I never pictured myself stuck behind a desk. My hands always wanted to do something. I saw family struggle despite hard work, and I wanted stability and good pay without crushing student debt. My aunt, an electrician, showed me the satisfaction of building. Plus, the demand for skilled workers is huge! Seeing other women in trades made it feel possible. It's tough as a pre-apprentice, but I'm learning, getting hands-on, and building a future I'm proud of. Honestly, it came down to stability and making good money without piling on student debt. My aunt, the electrician, showed me it's possible for women of colour like me to thrive in these careers. Plus, there's such a huge demand for skilled workers, I knew it was a smart move for my future.

The opportunity to find stable and in-demand jobs is a major influence for me, and I also have a personal interest in skilled trades work.

They also told us what they need in order to connect with employers and pursue skilled trades career pathways: mentorship opportunities (72%) and career fairs (59%). As well 75% are very interested in women-specific leadership training.

However, once they join the workplace, they face some systemic issues. While the sector successfully recruits them, with employers from our survey saying they use strategies like employee referral programs (73%) and diversity training for hiring managers (69%), these promising recruitment efforts are overshadowed by tough workplace cultures and insufficient retention practices. When 61% of employers report that they do not provide networking opportunities for their employees, citing operational and time challenges, it means that the women miss out on the crucial opportunity to get to know about others who are going through similar journeys and build supportive networks. This is not just an administrative oversight, but a systemic failure to build the supportive infrastructure needed to retain talent.

The data from our survey reveals a lack of support for women in the skilled trades: 65% of employer respondents do not provide

opportunities to learn about career advancement, and 87% do not offer women-specific leadership or mentorship programs. This gap between the high interest in leadership programs, and an absence of them in the workplace, suggests that career progression can be uneven and unpredictable. However, mentorship programs, leadership training, networking opportunities, and education on career advancement are key for long-term job retention and career sustainability. Unfortunately, such activities are also time consuming, cost both human and financial resources, and requires particular skills and knowledge to be able to create and operate. 56% of employers from our survey operate with fewer than 20 full-time employees, which raises questions about capacity and scope of responsibilities for individual positions and managers.

This is where Canada's nonprofit workforce development agencies, like Skills for Change, become an important part of career pathways. We are able to provide the expertise and supports, including training for employers, on equity issues and shifting workplace cultures.

Case Studies of Inclusive Employers

BC Infrastructure Benefits (BCIB)

Making inclusion “the operating system” of public infrastructure hiring.

BC Infrastructure Benefits (BCIB) stands out as a rare Canadian example of an organization where equity, accessibility, and culture change are not layered on top of how trades employment works, but are built into the core mechanics of how workers are hired, trained, supported, and deployed on

major public projects. BCIB's model is anchored in B.C.'s Community Benefits Agreement (CBA), with an explicit Priority Hiring approach that places qualified Indigenous workers, women, locals, and other underrepresented groups first in line for opportunities across the construction schedule and across trades.⁷⁰

What makes BCIB's approach worth examining closely is that it demonstrates both scale and measurability, two qualities that are notably absent from many inclusion claims in the construction sector. In 2024/25 alone, BCIB reports employing more than 2,900 individual skilled trades workers, positioning itself as one of the province's largest construction employers.⁷¹ That workforce is also overwhelmingly local: 96% of employees lived in British Columbia in 2024/25, and 86% lived within 100 km of the project they were working on.^{72, 73} This is an important point. Keeping workers close to home reduces the "camp culture" dynamic, supports family stability, and makes it more realistic for workers, particularly those who are most often pushed out by long-distance rotational work, to stay. BCIB's cumulative public reporting adds further texture to this picture: more than 6,500 people have worked for BCIB to date, and 20% have been rehired on at least one CBA project, an unusually direct indicator of continuity in a project-based industry.⁷⁴

BCIB also treats culture change as a retention and safety intervention rather than a compliance exercise. Its Respectful Onsite Initiative (ROI) delivers mandatory training built around Indigenous cultural competency through a "History Matters" component and justice and equity content, with 97% participation among project skilled

trades workers reported in 2024/25.^{75, 76} The reach of this program has extended beyond CBA sites, as other organizations have sought access to the training model, suggesting its resonance beyond BCIB's own workforce.

BCIB's approach also integrates equity into apprenticeship outcomes rather than concentrating inclusion efforts at the point of entry alone.⁷⁷ In 2024/25, BCIB exceeded its apprentice-hours target, reporting 31% apprentice hours relative to journeyperson hours, with 32% of apprentices advancing one or more levels during their time with the organization.⁷⁸ BCIB also publicly states that women on CBA projects are paid at the same rate as equally qualified men. In a sector where job assignment practices and wage transparency can quietly reproduce inequity even under formal pay scales, this kind of stated commitment carries real weight as a credibility signal.

Taken together, BCIB's story is one of inclusion built as a system: priority access, local continuity, structured culture change, and measurable apprenticeship progression, operating at an employer scale that connects EDI commitments to tangible outcomes.

Aecon Canada

EDI at industrial scale, tied to pathways, conversion points, and procurement power.

Aecon Canada's approach to equity, diversity, and inclusion is notable in part for its willingness to publish hard numbers, acknowledge where gaps remain, and tie inclusion to concrete conversion points into trades work, including placements, apprenticeships, and project-linked training,

rather than resting on broad statements about organizational values.⁷⁹ In its public EDI reporting, Aecon benchmarks its Canadian workforce against Employment Equity Act groups and population comparators. The organization reports 35.2% women and gender minorities, 24.7% people of colour, 2.5% Indigenous Peoples, and 3.5% people with disabilities, set against Canadian population reference points of 50.9% women and gender minorities, 26.5% people of colour, 5.0% Indigenous Peoples, and 22.3% people with disabilities.^{80, 81} The value here is not that the numbers signal a solved problem, but that reporting transparently enough to enable accountability and trend tracking over time is itself a meaningful practice that few construction employers have adopted.

Aecon has also focused attention on structured entry pathways in parts of the industry that are often among the hardest to access, particularly industrial and nuclear work, where informal networks and high credential thresholds can effectively close the door on newcomers and underrepresented groups. In 2024, Aecon participated as a host employer in an Ontario General Contractors Association New Entrants Bridging Program, with three newcomer placements converting into full-time roles on project management and site supervision career paths.⁸² That conversion metric matters in practice: it tracks movement from placement to stable employment in sectors that have historically been less accessible to newcomers.

For skilled trades pathways specifically, Aecon reports 140 placements through a Boilermaker Helpers Program in partnership with Boilermaker Local 128 and Ontario

Power Generation, as well as 14 Indigenous participants introduced to the Millwright Union as first-year apprentices through a low-barrier introductory program combining practical training and mentorship.⁸³ The organization also reports onboarding two new Indigenous carpenter apprentices through an Indigenous-led joint venture on project work, illustrating how equity pathways can be embedded directly into project delivery rather than operating as detached human resources initiatives.⁸⁴

Aecon has also taken procurement seriously as a tool for distributing opportunity more broadly. In fiscal 2024, the organization reports \$15.3 million in spend with women-owned suppliers, \$73.8 million with Indigenous-owned suppliers, \$63.7 million with minority-owned suppliers, and \$5.2 million with disabled-owned suppliers.⁸⁵ In a subcontract-heavy industry, this matters because opportunity flows not only through payroll hires but through who receives contracts, who becomes a preferred vendor, and who gains the repeat work that builds organizational capacity over time.

Aecon's case is perhaps most useful when understood as an example of inclusion infrastructure operating at industrial scale: transparent metrics, programmatic trade entry, and procurement practices that have the potential to redistribute opportunity across the supply chain.

PCL Construction

Women-focused inclusion built around retention, sponsorship, and a "stay-and-advance" architecture.

PCL's approach to inclusion for women is most clearly understood against the sector's baseline reality. BuildForce Canada reports that women represent close to 14% of all those employed in construction across Canada, described as the highest share recorded since the Labour Force Survey began in 1976.⁸⁶ That number reflects genuine progress, and it also reflects how much distance remains. PCL's approach is oriented not only toward bringing women into the sector, but toward creating the conditions that allow them to stay and advance, addressing a structural pattern in which recruitment without retention simply recycles women through short tenures in environments that are unsupportive or outright hostile.

What makes PCL's case particularly useful is the way it pairs culture indicators with advancement systems. PCL cites an overall employee engagement score of 85%, with 90% of respondents saying they would recommend PCL as a great place to work and 88% reporting a sense of purpose in their work.⁸⁷ These are not women-specific figures, but in a sector as heavily dominated by men as construction, high engagement across the workforce points to conditions that correlate with lower attrition when combined with targeted supports for underrepresented groups. PCL also reports hiring 977 students companywide in 2024, a pipeline figure that matters because early career entry points are often where gender segregation begins, in terms of who receives site exposure, who is mentored into supervisory pathways, and who gets the kind of trade-adjacent assignments that lead to long-run careers.⁸⁸

PCL's most substantive contribution to the conversation about supporting women in the trades lies in how it distinguishes between mentorship and sponsorship as distinct tools.⁸⁹ Through its College of Construction, PCL describes a sponsorship framework that was updated specifically to support diverse talent in accessing leadership roles, with explicit attention to ensuring that women and individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups receive skill development opportunities and access to senior leaders who can provide advocacy on their behalf.^{90,91} This distinction is worth thinking about. In the construction sector, the barrier is often not only at the point of hiring. It is at the point of deciding who receives stretch assignments, who gets introduced to the right people, and who is positioned for superintendent, project manager, estimator lead, or operations roles where both influence and compensation are concentrated. Mentorship builds skills and connection; sponsorship moves careers.

As such, PCL's practices point toward what might be described as a "stay-and-advance model": an effort to build the internal conditions, including engagement, training infrastructure, and active sponsorship, that make it more feasible for women to build durable careers in construction rather than being treated as short-term indicators of diversity progress.⁹²

Recommendations for Onboarding, Mentorship, and Career Development

For any company, onboarding sets the tone for inclusion, clarity of expectations, and early support. In Ontario's "Supporting an Accessible and Inclusive Skilled Trades and

Apprenticeship System" review, the government emphasises the need to "break the stigma, reduce barriers" and improve engagement of under-represented groups in trades.^{93, 94} But what does this look like in practice?

Outreach, Education, and Awareness

Broadening the pipeline of women entering the skilled trades requires more than adjusting hiring practices at the point of application. Reaching young women and girls before they leave high school, or earlier still, is an important part of building genuine interest and familiarity with what a trades career can offer. One initiative working directly in this space is Jill of All Trades (JOAT), a skilled trades outreach program founded at Conestoga College in 2014, designed to give young women in Grades 9 through 12 hands-on exposure to trades careers.⁹⁵

- Working alongside a network of community partners, JOAT delivers hands-on workshops in a safe, engaging environment led by female mentors, faculty, and students.
- By introducing participants to non-traditional career pathways and helping them make informed choices, JOAT aims to boost post-secondary enrolment in trades and contribute to addressing skilled trades shortages.

For employers thinking about how to translate this into onboarding practice, a pre-start phase offers a natural opportunity to ensure that new apprentices and entrants have clear information about the trade pathway, from apprentice through to journey person and Certificate of Qualification or Red Seal certification,

alongside a grounded introduction to site culture, health and safety expectations, and the supports available to equity-deserving groups, including women, newcomers, and persons with disabilities. Research points to why this early groundwork matters: a study by Hansen and Hondzel evaluating the Apprentice Retention Program and its implications for Ontario identified documentation, paperwork, and communication issues as contributing factors in apprentice non-completion, suggesting that addressing these proactively, before they become points of friction, is one of the more straightforward ways the sector can reduce preventable early attrition.⁹⁶

Hiring and Onboarding

Scaffolded onboarding programs are important for ensuring that any worker has the information they need, the opportunity to ask questions, and understands key milestones in the early days of their employment. Some best practices include:

- Pairing a new employee with a peer in a similar position (if possible) who can guide them on workplace culture, offer advice on navigating interpersonal dynamics, and field any questions that they might not yet be comfortable bringing to their manager.
- Clear and attainable learning objectives related to not only the technical aspects of the job but possibly even things like the organization or company history, major partners or clients, and different initiatives within the business pertinent to their role.
- Regular check-ins for the employee with their supervisor, making space for

for questions, updates on progress, and openness for any emergent access or accommodation needs.

- Setting objectives and meetings over a 30-, 60-, and 90-day timeline with the clear intention for these to be supportive opportunities for helping the employee get acclimated to their new environment and not top-down surveillance of their performance.
- Accessible, plain-language training materials, employee handbooks, and company policies, with attention paid to different abilities in how information is communicated and in what format.

For newcomer and racialized women in the skilled trades in particular, an employee-centred approach to onboarding has the potential to build confidence, trust, and belonging from the earliest days of employment, reducing the early attrition that represents one of the sector's most preventable losses.

Mentorship: Building Connection, Belonging and Skill Progression

Mentorship is widely acknowledged as a key factor in retention and successful progression in any career, especially for underrepresented groups. The employers, in a study by Howe et. al., it was found that the mentorship initiative provided onboarding tools, support for apprentices, and helped address recruitment and retention challenges related to equity-deserving populations.⁹⁷

In practice, mentorship programmes in the trades have some unique considerations:

- Journeypersons experienced in the trade are important mentors, but it's also important they have strong communication skills, are aware of various biases and power dynamics in the workplace, and can provide a confidential space for new employees.
- Pairing women apprentices with mentors who understand their lived experience increases belonging, as it helps create a personal bond and mutual understanding.⁹⁸
- Clear goals, meeting cadence (e.g., bi-weekly for first six months), scope of discussion (technical skills, workplace culture, career planning, inclusion supports), and mechanisms for reviewing progress.
- Peer groups and networking components, not just one-to-one relations, are other models that have benefits for women as they create community and reduce isolation.

Structured mentoring reduces attrition. Apprentices who lack support, mentoring, and clarity of workplace expectations are at greater risk of leaving.^{99,100} According to [ApprenticeSearch.com](https://www.apprenticesearch.com), 83% of apprentices from under-represented groups in their study said they would not have succeeded without their mentor, and 92% said mentors taught things they would not have otherwise learned.¹⁰¹ Strong mentorship practices lead to strong outcomes: increased retention rates, career progression, and a sense of belonging, and are all possible with the right supports and guidance for newcomer and racialized women in the skilled trades.

Career Development: Transparent Pathways and Inclusive Progression

Onboarding and mentorship set the stage

for successful jobs, but to advance in a skilled trades career, pathways must be transparent, inclusive and accessible. In 2023, The Canadian Apprenticeship Forum published a Best Practices for Recruitment and Retention guide that emphasizes ways employers can provide realistic career path information, continuous training, and internal mobility opportunities to support the retention of diverse trades recruits.¹⁰² Workforce development organizations like Skills for Change bring resources and practical expertise to small- and medium-sized enterprises navigating capacity-building and the slower work of shifting workplace culture. That cultural dimension is crucial too. Worksites where learning, respect, recognition, and inclusion are part of the daily fabric, rather than benefits listed in a policy document, are the ones where retention tends to be stronger and where the conditions for women to build durable, fulfilling careers are most likely to take hold.¹⁰³

CONVENING AND CONNECTING



Events and convenings play a critical role in supporting women's entry, retention, and advancement in male-dominated fields. Research on women's networking consistently demonstrates that enabling the formation and mobilization of professional networks is a key determinant of career progression and leadership attainment, particularly in sectors where informal networks have historically excluded women.¹⁰⁴ Purposefully designed convenings like conferences, leadership forums, and sector-specific summits can disrupt these patterns by creating structured opportunities for women to develop cross-organizational ties that connect them to decision-makers, employers, and industry leaders.¹⁰⁵ These settings are especially important in the skilled trades, where hiring, promotion, and supervisory appointments are frequently shaped through informal referral networks rather than transparent processes.

WiST gatherings across the country also served as critical sites of leadership development and field-building by fostering collective identity, knowledge exchange, and visibility. Studies of tradeswomen-focused conferences and leadership programs show that such gatherings increase participants' confidence, sense of belonging, and readiness to assume supervisory and leadership roles, factors strongly associated with long-term retention and

advancement.¹⁰⁶ Convenings also mobilize knowledge, linking individual experiences to broader structural change by facilitating dialogue among workers, unions, employers, training institutions, and policymakers.¹⁰⁷ Over time, these repeated points of connection contribute to the cultivation of a leadership pipeline by normalizing women's presence in influential spaces and strengthening their capacity to shape workplace culture and industry norms. In this way, events are not ancillary program activities, but strategic interventions that build the relational infrastructure required to shift leadership capacity in the skilled trades toward greater gender equity.

Events were held in BC, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia, and were shaped in close collaboration with local partners. This approach made space for what turned out to be one of the most important themes running through not only the entire WiST project but decades of women's advocacy: the issues shaping women's experiences are not uniform. While there was much commonality, each region also surfaced unique issues and tensions, and at times even contradictions.

British Columbia

Across events in Vancouver, Surrey, and Kelowna, more than 250 people gathered to share their experiences of, and aspirations for, the skilled trades. One of the most striking observations from these conversations is how rarely careers in the trades follow a straight line. Women came to the trades from remarkably varied backgrounds and at different points in their lives, and that diversity of entry points is part of what makes the sector more accessible than its reputation often suggests.

What continues to limit that accessibility, however, are assumptions that have proven stubbornly persistent. The idea that women lack the physical strength or aptitude for trades work is one that participants challenged directly. Women in the sector described demonstrating superior organization and efficiency aptitudes, and some employers spoke of actively recruiting women for roles like welding precisely because of specific physical advantages like the ability to maneuver more easily in confined spaces. And yet job postings are still routinely written in ways that implicitly target men, and a single negative experience with a woman on a worksite can be enough for some employers to base all future hiring decisions on generalizations. The gap between the reality of what women bring to the trades and the assumptions that continue to shape how employers recruit is one that deserves ongoing attention.

For women who are already in the sector, the absence of women in leadership positions creates a particular kind of isolation. Without access to women mentors or managers,

career progression can feel uncertain and the sense of belonging can be fragile. This sits alongside an information problem: women frequently told us that they struggle to find clear, accessible details about training programs, career pathways, and the supports available to them, and that much of what they do know comes through informal networks and social media groups rather than through anything systematic. What these conversations point toward is the importance of treating mentorship as a core practice rather than an add-on. There is something worth exploring in the potential for journeypersons to mentor apprentices beyond the technical skills, which certainly does happen in many instances. But looking to how such capacity can be built deliberately and supported structurally would provide additional layers of support and career advancement.

Yet the fundamentals of workplace environments also continue to matter. Women's washrooms on worksites and PPE designed for women's bodies are the kinds of baseline conditions that communicate whether the sector is serious about welcoming women or merely tolerating them. For women with caregiving responsibilities, the need for flexibility in hours and for clearer, more systematic channels through which to raise concerns or make suggestions remains pressing.

Manitoba

The Winnipeg convening drew approximately 400 participants alongside employers, unions, and educators, and the conversations there revealed a layered picture of what it takes to enter, and remain, in the skilled trades in Manitoba. As in other

regions, a lack of early exposure to the trades as a real career option continues to shape who considers the sector at all. For many young people, and for many families, the image of trades work as unstable, physically demanding, and unwelcoming to anyone who is not a man remains difficult to shift.

For women who do pursue a path into the trades, the journey carries its own distinct pressures. Bias in hiring, both conscious and unconscious, is a reality that participants described encountering, with some women sharing experiences of outright gender-based rejections. But some of the most striking testimony in Manitoba was about what happens after a woman is hired. Being told, explicitly, that one's success or failure will determine whether the employer hires any other women in the future places an extraordinary burden on individuals who are simply trying to do their job. This kind of outsized expectation removes the room to learn, to make mistakes, and to grow that every new worker deserves, and it reflects a systemic problem that goes well beyond individual attitudes.

Microaggressions, misogyny, discrimination, and a lack of advancement opportunities also formed part of the texture of what participants described. The absence of properly fitting PPE and adequate facilities, including something as basic as a women's washroom with running water, came up repeatedly as evidence of a systemic lack of consideration for women's needs in the design of the trades workplace.

What the Manitoba conversations also surfaced, however, is a clear sense of what could be done differently. Flexible working hours, framed not only as a support for

women but for all workers with caregiving responsibilities, including men, were identified as a meaningful way to bring the sector's scheduling norms more in line with how people actually live. Employer-sponsored childcare, opening early enough to align with trades schedules, was raised as a practical support that could make a real difference. The idea of extending parental benefits, rather than limiting them to maternity, was also discussed as a way to distribute responsibility more equitably and reduce some of the pushback that often falls on women who need accommodation. And across many of the conversations, there was a consistent call for employers to move away from relying solely on external consultants and instead to ask the women already working for them what they need. For pregnant tradespeople in particular, this means engaging on a case-by-case basis to adapt work duties, ensure access to safety information about hazards like heat and chemical exposure, and recognize the need for adaptive workwear, so that women can continue their careers without having to choose between their health and their livelihood.

Ontario

In Toronto, over 300 participants and more than 30 businesses and organizations gathered, and what emerged from those conversations reflects the particular complexity of trying to shift culture in a large, diverse, metropolitan centre. The challenges women described in Ontario are not primarily about logistics or infrastructure; they are rooted in perception and in the ways that longstanding assumptions about who belongs in the trades continue to shape hiring, workplace

culture, and even the choices families make about their children's futures.

The persistence of what participants called the "All-Boys Club" dynamic was a recurring theme. Deeply held assumptions, particularly among older men in leadership, about whether women have the physical capacity or the temperament for trades work were identified as a foundational barrier to getting hired in the first place. For women who do get through the door, these same attitudes can follow them onto the worksite, shaping whether they feel accepted and safe, and influencing whether they stay. Several participants spoke about the exhaustion of being in an environment where they have to continually prove their legitimacy and of watching talented colleagues leave the sector altogether as a result. But the reach of these perceptions extends beyond the workplace. A number of participants noted that within some immigrant communities, historical associations between trades work and male-dominated, often unsafe environments create hesitation among parents and grandparents when it comes to encouraging a trades career for their children. This is not a simple problem of information, but one of trust, representation, and the slower work of reshaping what the trades look and feel like from the outside.

Alongside the cultural dimensions, participants in Ontario also raised concrete practical barriers. For women with caregiving responsibilities, the scheduling structures of the trades frequently create conflicts that are difficult to navigate, and there is a need for more creative thinking around what proximity to childcare and flexible hours could look like in this sector. A less

commonly discussed but significant barrier is the lack of a driver's license for women entering the trades later in life, given that worksites are often dispersed and public transit is not a reliable alternative.

At the same time, participants were not only describing problems. The conversations in Ontario were also generative, pointing to what shifts have proven effective. Women in the trades have demonstrated time and again that they bring strong leadership qualities and high levels of composure under pressure, and there is growing interest in how these contributions can be better recognized and amplified. Tailored training, including hands-on job shadowing that bridges the gap between the classroom and the worksite, was identified as an important piece of the puzzle. So too was the work of reaching young people and their families earlier, with campus tours and direct outreach offering one approach to reframing what a trades career represents, long before women are at the point of considering apprenticeship.

Quebec

The Montreal convening drew roughly 100 participants alongside a diverse range of partner organizations spanning federal departments, training institutions, and community groups. The event brought together women at different points in their careers, from young college students exploring what a trades career might look like to women already certified and working in the field. That breadth of experience in the room was itself significant, reflecting the appetite across generations and backgrounds for the kinds of conversations that rarely happen in structured, supportive settings.

Panelists and audience members talked about the distinct regulatory character of Quebec's skilled trades ecosystem and the ways it shapes the experiences of women, with few parallels elsewhere in the country. As the most regulated construction environment in North America, the province's construction industry is governed primarily through the CCQ (Commission de la construction du Québec) and the RBQ (Régie du bâtiment du Québec). The CCQ is the administrative body responsible for the application of the Act Respecting Labour Relations, Vocational Training and Workforce Management in the Construction Industry (Act R-20). It manages social benefits, vocational training, and labour management, and ensures compliance with collective agreements across the province's construction sector.¹⁰⁸ The RBQ is the provincial agency responsible for overseeing public safety and the quality of construction work in Quebec. It manages the licensing of contractors and owner-builders, enforces the Building Act and Safety Codes, and offers financial protection and guarantee plans to consumers.¹⁰⁹ As such, working on residential or commercial sites legally requires union membership and recognized cards of competency under what is known as la loi R-20. As the updated version of the Act Respecting Labour Relations, Vocational Training and Workforce Management in the Construction Industry, this law provides the legal framework for labour relations in Quebec's construction industry. It mandates a "closed shop" system, requiring mandatory union membership and the possession of valid competency certificates for all workers on regulated sites.¹¹⁰

For women, this framework creates a specific set of entry conditions that are not

simply bureaucratic but define who is recognized, who can work, and under what terms. Navigating this landscape without the benefit of placement or cooperative education components as part of their diploma programs, which Quebec does not currently offer, means that the transition from school to worksite can feel particularly abrupt. Several participants reflected on how much they would gain from the ability to bring lived workplace experience back into their training environments, and from teachers who could help them process and learn from what they encountered on site.

Quebec's linguistic and cultural duality adds a further layer of complexity that does not map onto any other province's experience. The province is not simply bilingual; it is a space where two distinct business mentalities, shaped by history, geography, and culture, coexist and occasionally collide. Francophone and anglophone workers and employers can approach regulation, hierarchy, and decision-making in genuinely different ways, and for women navigating trades workplaces, understanding those dynamics is often as important as technical skill. These are not simply language barriers. They are questions of professional culture. Learning to move between them is a skill that rarely appears in any curriculum.

What surfaced most persistently in the Montreal conversations, however, was the challenge of naming and responding to harm that resists easy documentation. Participants described a particular form of psychological harassment that is pervasive but difficult to prove: the workday goals addressed to men in a group while a woman in the room is overlooked; the laughter shared between colleagues as she walks past; the suggestion met with a snicker

rather than a response. What one participant described as a slow cancer captures something important about how this kind of exclusion operates. It is tolerable at first, and then it wears you down. And because it rarely produces a single incident that can be pointed to, it leaves women uncertain about how to respond and often uncertain about whether they have the right to do so.

The conversations in Montreal also opened space for a harder question about who carries the burden of culture change. Bystander behaviour among men came up directly: the colleagues who see something happen and do not intervene, not out of indifference, but because speaking up risks their own standing. As one participant put it, “stand up for someone and you are seen as a troublemaker.” This is especially true for those early in their careers, before they have built enough credibility to absorb the cost. What these points tell us is that changing the trades will require more than programs aimed at women. It requires creating conditions in which men who want to act differently are supported in doing so.

Nova Scotia

The story emerging from Halifax and Cape Breton is one of vibrant, untapped potential in a close-knit community that is ready for change. These events drew over 150 attendees, reflecting a strong appetite for opportunities that many participants felt had been, until now, largely out of sight. Industry partners offered on-the-spot interviews, creating immediate, direct pathways to employment.

A defining feature of the Nova Scotia context is that the barriers women described are less

about deeply entrenched workplace culture and more about the practical realities of living and working in a smaller, interconnected community. Tradeswomen here spoke less about navigating gender dynamics and more about proving themselves through their craft, their work ethic, and their example. Many described feeling a sense of safety and community belonging, with family connections to the trades serving as a natural on-ramp and local colleges as a trusted point of entry.

That said, real obstacles remain. Women in Nova Scotia pointed to a lack of properly fitting Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as a persistent issue, along with the need for clearer chemical labelling, particularly for those who are pregnant. Infrastructure and scheduling also came up consistently: when standard shift start times of 7 AM are set against daycare openings of 8 AM, and when reliable transit to worksites simply does not exist, the math does not work for women with caregiving responsibilities. These are not abstract policy concerns; they are the daily friction that shapes whether a career in the trades is sustainable.

Encouragingly, employers in the region appear open to working through these issues. What came through in the conversations, and what we heard through our national survey, is that when employers are made aware of specific needs, many are willing to respond even without the need for formal policy change (although policy can also be an important way of ensuring that needs are met at the outset). The stories shared of pregnant tradeswomen being actively accommodated point to what becomes possible when the relationship between workers and employers is

communicative and trust-based. There is room here to explore what co-created adjustments, like shifting start times or piloting community-based childcare options, could look like when employers, tradeswomen, and community organizations work together with the understanding that change of this kind is gradual and builds upon itself.

National Challenges, Local Solutions

Taken together, the WiST convenings tell a story that is both national in scope and deeply local in its texture. What women shared, alongside employers, unions, educators, and community partners, adds up to something more than a list of barriers. It is a picture of a sector at a turning point, with real momentum alongside real, unresolved tensions.

Across all of these conversations, several threads run consistently. Biased hiring practices, the absence of women in leadership, inadequate workplace infrastructure, and the chronic mismatch between trades scheduling and caregiving realities all came up in every region. These issues, as regionally specific as they may be, are not new. But what these events have reinforced is the value of bringing people together to connect, build community, and collaborate. The partnerships that made these convenings possible, and the candid, generous sharing that happened within them, are themselves worth building on.

NETWORKING AND ADVANCING



The WiST Leadership Academy

Throughout our events across the country, we heard time and time again the importance of networks. We've mentioned several times in this report how informal networks are common in Canada's skilled trades sector, especially in small businesses, and so entry points for women are limited. In our survey, 59% of women interested in the skilled trades said career fairs and job expos are important ways of building knowledge about career pathways, and 52% said networking mixers and social events would also help influence them entering the field. As stated earlier, despite much desire to hire and support newcomer and racialized women in entering the trades and developing careers, employers struggle with capacity and resources for organizing such opportunities. And this is especially true of small businesses. However, without access to networks, women experience a lack of role models and mentors, which can affect retention and longevity in a skilled trades career. It also reinforces isolation and maintenance of the status quo.

And so we were not surprised that when we asked women interested in entering the trades what would help them make the jump into this sector, 72% said mentorship opportunities and 75% said women-specific leadership training.

Strong mentorship would really help me take the next step.

Supportive mentorship, especially other women in the field, and clear information about the different paths I can take.

Seeing other women of color succeed in [the] trades would really inspire me. However, 65% of employers in our survey do not provide opportunities to learn about career advancement to any employees, with 87% not providing women-specific programs. With that said, there are reasons why employers might not be able to do so.

We'd love to offer career advancement training, but as a small company, we simply don't have the resources or dedicated staff to make it happen.

Providing structured training is costly, and right now we can't afford to take on that expense without external support.

We'd like to offer advancement training, but as a small team with limited resources, it's just not feasible.

However, employers are also committed to figuring out how they can better support women.

We are looking into partnership opportunities to make [leadership and/or mentorship programs] a reality.

We know supporting women's advancement is critical, and we're trying to figure out what works for our size and resources. It's a learning process, but we're committed to making it happen.

I think it's beneficial that my organization provides opportunities to learn about career advancement because it is so important, especially as a woman, to know how far you can go with a certain company [and] also what limitations there may be.

With the convenings across the country helping to build networks and draw connections, developing a program that would deepen knowledge and skills in leadership helped to advance the aims of the WiST initiative. When Skills for Change was designing the project, we drew on many years of experience in building mentorship, leadership, and entrepreneurship programs for women and other underserved communities. Yet, we recognized that the construction and manufacturing-related skilled trades are unique in their cultures and workplace norms. And so, the WiST Leadership Academy is about turning potential into power and breaking the mould in one of Canada's most vital sectors. Sessions included:

- Career Planning and Navigating the Workplace shared practical tools for career goal-setting, apprenticeship navigation, and essential strategies for thriving in male-dominated environments.
- Mentorship, Networking, and Sponsorship taught participants how to identify mentors, build trust, and effectively leverage professional networks for career acceleration.

- Navigating Safety in the Workplace offered training on workplace safety and gender-based violence prevention, equipping women with practical tools for advocacy and communication to ensure safe work sites.
- Mental Health, Burnout, and Work-Life Balance provided strategies for managing stress, avoiding burnout, and maintaining wellness in a demanding industry where work hours are often irregular.
- Being a Workplace Advocate: gave participants practical advocacy tools to promote both equity and psychological safety at work.
- Peer Support in Skilled Trades featured women from the field discussing the ways community networks can reduce isolation.

Where Leadership Takes Shape

Participant feedback across the four Leadership Academy cohorts provided critical insight into how leadership development functions for women at different stages of their skilled trades pathways. Rather than indicating shortcomings, this feedback surfaced distinct learning needs shaped by career stage, employment status, and lived experience, reinforcing the importance of differentiated leadership programming within the trades sector.

Across cohorts, participants consistently identified peer-based learning, particularly storytelling panels and facilitated discussions with women currently working in the trades, as the most impactful elements of the program. These sessions supported confidence-building, validated experiences

in male-dominated environments, and helped participants articulate leadership identities grounded in real workplace contexts. For newcomers to the trades, these narratives were especially influential in translating abstract career pathways into tangible, attainable futures.

Feedback also highlighted the ways leadership development needs evolve as women progress through the trades. Participants already established in apprenticeships engaged most deeply with content that addressed workplace navigation, advocacy, and influence within existing systems, while those newer to the sector expressed strong interest in opportunities that connected learning to lived workplace exposure. Taken together, these insights reinforced the importance of aligning leadership training not only with gender equity goals, but also with participants' proximity to employment and their immediate decision-making contexts.

The program's virtual delivery model was widely recognized for expanding access, particularly for women balancing caregiving responsibilities, shift work, or geographic constraints. At the same time, participants emphasized the value of peer connection, informal mentorship, and trust-building, which are more easily cultivated through sustained, in-person engagement. This distinction informed subsequent delivery decisions, particularly for regionally concentrated cohorts where in-person formats could be leveraged to strengthen local networks and mentorship continuity.

Narratives as Navigation

Building on these insights, later iterations of

the Leadership Academy were intentionally refined to strengthen alignment between leadership development, skilled trades realities, and local labour market contexts. Cohorts delivered in Ontario's Peel region transitioned to fully in-person formats, enabling deeper peer connection, stronger mentorship relationships, and curriculum alignment with regional unions, employers, and job pathways. Future iterations of the Leadership Academy will continue to emphasize core leadership objectives like confidence-building, career navigation, mentorship, and equity advocacy, while incorporating greater flexibility in how content is delivered. This includes modular learning components that allow participants to engage with material most relevant to their career stage, as well as structured mentorship models designed to extend learning beyond the formal program period.

The WiST Leadership Academy offers a compelling example of how leadership development for women in the skilled trades can be both impactful and responsive. Designed as an intensive, values-driven program grounded in equity, inclusion, and the realities of a rapidly evolving trades sector, the Academy created meaningful opportunities for women to build confidence, expand professional networks, and strengthen their capacity to navigate and influence skilled trades workplaces. By centring women with lived experience in the sector—through facilitation, storytelling, and peer exchange—the program ensured that leadership was framed not as an abstract concept, but as a practical, attainable set of skills rooted in real trade environments.

Participant experiences point to the Academy's particular strength in confidence-building and career affirmation.

For women new to the trades, exposure to role models and structured mentorship translated directly into increased self-efficacy and clarity about next steps. As one newcomer reflected, the program “gave me the confidence to pursue a career in the skilled trades,” underscoring the value of early-stage leadership interventions that combine skills development with relational support.

The program was a game changer! I came in with no prior experience, and the workshops and mentorship gave me the confidence to pursue a career in skilled trades.

At the same time, participant feedback highlighted an important design insight with broader relevance: leadership development is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour. Women already established in apprenticeships engaged most strongly with content that addressed leadership within existing workplace hierarchies, advanced advocacy, and career progression. This distinction does not diminish the Academy’s effectiveness; rather, it reinforces the importance of intentionally differentiating leadership training to reflect varied career stages, levels of experience, and proximity to decision-making power.

Taken together, these findings position the WiST Leadership Academy as a strong foundation for a scalable, high-impact leadership development model—one that balances accessibility with depth, and confidence-building with practical application. The program demonstrates that when leadership training is grounded in lived experience, attentive to intersectional realities, and designed to evolve alongside participants’ careers, it can play a meaningful role in strengthening retention, leadership capacity, and long-term equity within the skilled trades.

THE GREEN TURN



Partway through WiST's three-year duration, we incorporated a focus on environmental sustainability. What does this look like in skilled trades training? How might employers situate their work through a climate justice framing to attract tradeswomen? What are intersections between women's leadership in the trades and leadership in climate justice?

Climate-Aligned Trades and Environmental Sustainability

Canada's climate transition has redefined the skilled trades as both an environmental and equity imperative. As federal and provincial governments advance ambitious decarbonization targets, the trades workforce stands at the core of this transformation, responsible for building, maintaining, and retrofitting the infrastructure of a low-carbon economy. Federal initiatives such as the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change and the Sustainable Jobs Plan (2023–2025) underscore that sustainable economic growth depends on equipping workers with low-carbon and digital skills.^{111,112} And both the Sustainable Jobs Act (C-50) and Canada's Building Trades Unions' Building It Green curriculum further situate tradespeople at the front line of the green transition, emphasizing retraining in energy-efficient construction, electrification, and renewable-energy

installation.^{113,114} But while the green economy promises new opportunities, the sector's readiness to deliver climate-aligned work remains uneven, and gender equity continues to lag behind technological progress.

Implementation gaps persist between national ambitions and workforce readiness. In Ontario alone, more than 100,000 new construction workers will be required by 2030 to meet both infrastructure and climate targets, revealing a looming skills mismatch that risks slowing progress toward net-zero goals.¹¹⁵ Municipal frameworks such as Toronto's TransformTO: Net-Zero Strategy illustrate the localization of these goals through initiatives in green building retrofits, electric mobility, and community-scale renewable energy.¹¹⁶ Yet such frameworks are not without shortcomings. Critics have noted that TransformTO lacks enforceable accountability mechanisms, and that formal commitments, including a 2019 pledge to apply an equity lens to all climate decision-making, remain largely unfulfilled. This raises questions about whether equity-deserving communities will be meaningfully supported through the green transition or further marginalized by it.¹¹⁷

Gender, in particular, has received much focus in climate action. Across initiatives aimed at greening the built environment, skilled trades are positioned as a linchpin connecting environmental sustainability to

decent work and gender equality, two key features of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, what the convergence of climate frameworks and their limitations makes plain is that bold commitments and workforce readiness do not automatically advance in tandem. Policy ambitions are moving faster than the systems, institutions, and supports needed to bring workers from equity-deserving communities into the green economy on genuinely equitable terms. Bridging that gap will require more than good intentions; it demands sustained, coordinated investment in accessible training, inclusive recruitment, and the structural reforms necessary to ensure that the workers building Canada's low-carbon future are as diverse as the communities they serve.

Skills for Change has gradually been expanding its presence in the climate space, most notably through youth programs. But as we have also continued our work collaborating with training delivery agents (TDAs) in the skilled trades, we have looked to the ways that we can bridge our sustainability training programs with trades training. However, the trade-level picture of climate readiness in training is uneven and, in some of the most consequential areas, deeply concerning. The occupations most central to the green transition, including HVAC technicians, refrigeration and air-conditioning mechanics, construction electricians, industrial mechanics, and welders, are also among those where formal training delivery has been slowest to incorporate green competencies in any systematic way.¹¹⁸ These trades form the backbone of heat-pump installation, building energy retrofits, electrification infrastructure, and renewable energy development, yet the in-class curricula

delivered by TDAs continue to follow trade-specific curriculum standards that are reviewed and updated through processes not designed for rapid response to emerging technological and environmental demands. In Ontario, these standards are developed by Skilled Trades Ontario and administered through the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. TDAs must be approved on a trade-by-trade basis to deliver instruction at each certification level, embedding a structural rigidity that slows the uptake of new green content.¹¹⁹ As recent research commissioned by the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum found, several of the most climate-critical trades are already identified as facing high to moderate risks of recruitment shortfalls, a finding that points not only to an inadequate supply of workers but to the inadequacy of training systems to equip the workers who do enter.¹²⁰

Post-secondary TDAs face compounding barriers to the kind of rapid curriculum modernization the green transition demands. Updating apprenticeship programs typically requires consultation with industry advisory committees, regulatory sign-off, and often substantial capital investment in new equipment and instructor professional development, processes that routinely take years to unfold.¹²¹ Even where colleges have the institutional will to integrate green content, these timelines create a persistent lag between what is being taught and what the sector actually requires.¹²² Some institutions have begun offering short-cycle micro-credentials in areas such as electric vehicle maintenance or energy-efficient systems installation, and some trade unions have developed climate-literacy modules.

These are promising initiatives, but they remain largely peripheral to core certification pathways and rarely count toward formal apprenticeship completion.¹²³ The result is that green competencies continue to be treated as optional enhancements rather than foundational elements of trades training, and the workers who most need access to these credentials, including newcomer, racialized, and Indigenous women, are often the least likely to encounter them through the formal system.

The cumulative effect of these institutional limitations is a significant and widening misalignment between Canada's decarbonization commitments and the workforce systems charged with delivering on them. Research commissioned by the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum projects that Canada will need to train and certify more than 264,000 apprentices by 2034, a 49% increase over current levels, with refrigeration and air-conditioning mechanics and construction electricians alone accounting for nearly half of the added employment demand under an accelerated green scenario.¹²⁴ Fragmented data systems, inconsistent curriculum standards across provinces, limited employer sponsorship for green-specific training, and the absence of a national coordinating strategy for green skills development all constrain the system's ability to scale to meet this need.¹²⁵

Women, Climate Justice, and the Skilled Trades

Having looked at the broader context from strategy through to training, part of our national WiST survey gathered high-level

information on the role of skilled trades employers, and interests of women, in advancing climate justice and environmental sustainability. We included this section to gauge the potential for such a focus to attract women to careers in the trades and to also better understand if/how skilled trades employers were engaging with "green" work. Moreover, scholars and global institutions increasingly frame gender and climate justice as interconnected priorities within sustainable development. As the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals Report (2024) highlights, the world continues to fall behind on its 2030 Agenda, and women experience the consequences of this delay most acutely. Furthermore, structural inequalities in employment, education, and political participation intensify women's exposure to climate-related risks. In BRICS+¹²⁶ economies, empirical evidence shows a strong correlation between gender equality and reduced carbon emissions, suggesting that inclusive governance directly enhances environmental outcomes.¹²⁷

Researchers have also linked women's leadership to higher rates of green innovation. For instance, companies with gender-diverse boards more actively pursue environmental technologies.¹²⁸ In the European Union, women in agriculture lead the adoption of sustainable practices by integrating environmental goals into entrepreneurship.¹²⁹ Yet despite these contributions, women remain underrepresented in key sectors driving climate action including renewable energy, sustainable construction, and environmental technology.¹³⁰ In Canada, women made up only 28.6% of the environmental and clean technology workforce as of 2021, with even

lower representation in technical and leadership roles. Racialized and immigrant women face further exclusion due to systemic barriers such as wage disparities, deskilling, and limited access to green training and career pathways.¹³¹ As such, around the world, the skilled trades are central to addressing the climate crisis and gender equity. And approaching skilled trades employment through a social justice lens, be it gender, climate, or others, is where systemic change is possible.

We asked women interested in working in the skilled trades (n=135) how interested they are in climate activism and environmental sustainability as it relates to their trade. The responses were striking. 59% said they are very interested in climate activism and environmental sustainability specific to their trade, and another 39% said they are somewhat interested. Taken together, that is nearly universal engagement with the topic among this group. When we look at specific communities within this cohort, the picture becomes even more compelling. Among newcomer women (n=65), 60% described themselves as very interested. That number rises to 74% among racialized women (n=50), and all six Indigenous women respondents expressed being very interested in climate activism and environmental sustainability connected to their trade.

We also asked these women how interested they are in acquiring green skills or specializing in environmentally sustainable practices within their trade. A significant 64% said they are very interested, and 29% said they are somewhat interested. Again, the numbers are particularly notable when broken down by community: 60% of newcomer women, 78% of racialized women,

and 100% of Indigenous women respondents said they are very interested in acquiring green skills or deepening their focus on sustainable practice within their trade. What this tells us is that women who are drawn to the skilled trades, including those who are newcomers, racialized, and Indigenous, are not simply interested in entering the sector as it currently exists; they bring a strong orientation toward green action and sustainability and a genuine eagerness to develop skills that reflect where the sector is heading. This comes through not only in the numbers but in what women shared when we asked them directly what role they believe climate action and environmental sustainability play in the future of the skilled trades, and how that shapes their own career aspirations.

Climate action and sustainability are shaping the future of skilled trades. It motivates me to be part of a workforce that builds responsibly and supports eco-friendly practices. This gives more purpose to my career and aligns with Canada's goals for a greener future.

I think all skilled trades should be done in a way that protects the environment. We should not harm the climate to make progress. It is important to build things that are safe, energy-efficient, and good for the future.

I believe climate action and sustainability are going to be a huge part of the future in the skilled trades. As we move toward greener buildings, cleaner energy, and more efficient systems, tradespeople will be on the front lines making that happen. Knowing that I could be part of building a more sustainable future really motivates me and it makes the work feel even more meaningful and gives me a strong sense of purpose in choosing this path.

Yet, as we previously mentioned based on other studies, the workplace has not fully caught up.

*Ideally, it would be my entire lifestyle, and my career would revolve around it. However, I'm not sure I have the luxury of that choice at this point, though. I *had* been trying to pursue a career as a Wind Turbine Technician, but it's like the "wild west" out there: limited (and expensive) training programs, no union specifically for them, no job security, and pay is far lower than the starting wage of a 1st year apprentice in another skilled trade,*

These perspectives highlight a strong desire to contribute to a greener economy and find purpose in the work through environmentally responsible practices. However, for this enthusiasm to translate into a robust green workforce, there is a clear need for more structured, accessible, and financially viable training and employment opportunities in sustainable trades. This same curiosity about where the trades are heading brings us to an equally important question: what do women already working in the sector think about climate action, environmental sustainability, and the training opportunities available to them in this space?

Among the 121 women in the trades who responded to our survey, 51% said they are very interested in climate activism and environmentally sustainable practices specific to their trade, and another 36% said they are somewhat interested. As with the women interested in entering the trades, the levels of engagement are particularly strong among specific communities: 79% of newcomer women in the trades (n=14), 83% of racialized women (n=23), and 44% of Indigenous women (n=18) described themselves as very interested in climate activism and environmentally sustainable practices connected to their work. The alignment between women considering trades careers and women already working in the field is notable. Across both groups, there is a consistent and meaningful orientation toward climate action and sustainability suggesting this is not a niche interest but rather is something the women in and around the trades are bringing with them, and in many cases, actively looking for ways to develop.

High Interest, Low Investment

When we asked women already working in the trades whether their employer provides training on green skills and environmentally sustainable practices specific to their trade, 75% said that their employer does not. Only 25% said that such training is available to them. Women who chose to elaborate on their experiences offer a more textured picture of the array of current practices.

No, my employer doesn't provide this type of training. He does focus heavily on energy efficiency in building, which I feel is related to green skills and climate activism. However, we don't source green products or choose practices specifically because of this. We also use a ton of foam and adhesives, which I don't feel are environmentally clean or responsible. I wish we focused more on this type of building, but sadly in my area I think it would be difficult to find customers willing to pay for the products.

Yes. I'm lucky that my mentor has taken a few courses on green building practices over the years, and he always shares his knowledge with me! I've had a lot of requests for doing energy efficiency retrofits after people get energy audits done, and I've been able to talk to several of the auditors in detail, they are very helpful and informative. That has allowed me to go on to educate new clients about energy retrofits, even if they have not had the audits done. ... I also wanted to say that I'm passionate about saving materials and re-using materials, and [the] foundation of my small business is that I salvage materials from one house and then use them in the next house. I almost never buy lumber or trim from the store, nor a host of other small items, because I have a stock of salvaged material that I draw from as often as I can. My clients love it, because it saves them money and helps them help the environment!

No. He'd have to have an interest in it, and if training is provided, then I'd be the first to take it. Around here, tradespeople seem to see sustainable practices as "red tape" or as hoops to jump through. They're just trying to satisfy the inspector, with not much internal motivation for improving things environmentally.

Yes. Our company specializes in energy-efficient homes, and my employer is only taking jobs that allow us to keep improving our skill sets.

As we can see, while some employers are actively embracing environmentally conscious approaches, particularly driven by individual passion and client demand, lag remains due to a lack of interest, perceived cost barriers, and insufficient training.

165 employers participated in our survey, and we asked them how interested they are in climate activism, sustainability, and the green economy. 68% described themselves as somewhat interested, while 28% said they are very interested. Only 4% said they are not interested at all. On the surface, that is an encouraging set of numbers. But interest and action do not always travel together. When asked whether they provide training to their employees on climate action and sustainability, only 29% of employers said that they do, while 71% said they do not. That finding sits in close alignment with what women in the trades told us from their own experience, of whom 25% said their employer offers green skills training and 75% said they do not. The numbers from both sides of the employment relationship are telling a consistent story.

The pattern holds when the question is made more specific: does your organization provide training to your employees regarding climate action and sustainability? 29% of employers said yes, and 71% said no. The gap between the level of interest employers express in sustainability and the degree to which that interest translates into training and skill development for their workers is one of the more significant tensions this survey surfaces, and one that has particular implications for newcomer, racialized, and Indigenous women who have told us, in large numbers, that developing green skills is something they are genuinely eager to do.

Women are Ready, Systems are Not

Our survey findings reveal a clear, strong pulse of interest and a major gap in action. First, women are ready to lead the green transition. Among the 121 women currently employed in the trades, 87% (51% very + 36% somewhat) are interested in climate activism and environmental sustainability specific to their trade. This interest is even stronger among the 135 women interested in joining the trades, with nearly 98% (59% very + 39% somewhat) expressing interest, and 93% (64% very + 29% somewhat) wanting to acquire these green skills.

Second, employers recognize the importance but lag in training. Nearly all employers in our survey (96% = 28% very + 68% somewhat) express at least some interest in climate action, sustainability, and the green economy. And while this is a strong foundation of goodwill, this interest is not yet translating into action where it matters most: training. A startling 75% of

employed women report their employer does not provide training on green skills. This is reflected on the employer side, where 71% confirm they are not providing this training on climate action and sustainability, and green skills and sustainability practices.

These findings are an essential roadmap for how the Women in Skilled Trades project can deconstruct barriers and foster a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future. The interest from women, both current and prospective workers, shows that investing in green skills training is an effective strategy for gender equity. By connecting women, particularly newcomer, racialized women, and Indigenous women with high-demand green training, we solve two crises at once: the need for skilled workers and the need for a sustainable workforce. And so, upskilling in the skilled trades is not just a matter of social equity, but also an economic imperative for a sustainable sector.

Institutional Challenges in Green Skills Development

Earlier we identified the pace of curricular redesign as a friction point. But many “green” skills can be, and are being, embedded within existing programs such as updates in energy literacy, emissions-reduction practices, and digital monitoring tools.¹³² However, TDAs often operate within outdated frameworks that separate environmental competencies from core technical training.¹³³ This fragmentation results in uneven exposure to sustainability content and limited opportunities for underrepresented groups to participate in green upskilling.

In addition, barriers persist at the intersection of gender and sustainability training. Women's limited access to high-demand green sectors—such as renewable-energy construction, retrofitting, and electric-vehicle manufacturing—is exacerbated by economic and cultural constraints. Programs like Colleges and Institutes Canada's pre-apprenticeship streams and the Future Skills Centre's Clean Economy initiative demonstrate promising models, integrating sustainability learning with equity mandates.^{134,135} Still, funding remains fragmented, and employers report difficulty in assessing the return on investment for green-specific training.

peer learning could strengthen equity pathways into green trades for women, Indigenous peoples, and newcomers. Embedding feminist and intersectional perspectives in such efforts ensures that the "green turn" does not replicate the exclusions of earlier industrial transitions but instead redefines the trades as a site of collective sustainability and social justice.

Feminist and Community-Based Pathways

At a conceptual level, feminism offers an alternative orientation for climate-aligned workforce development—one that connects environmental transition to social transformation. Decolonial feminist action research links sustainability to relational care, accountability, and justice, rather than metrics alone.^{136,137} Applied in community-based organizations like Skills for Change, this approach can re-ground trades training within lived experience, advancing environmental goals while addressing inequities in labour participation and knowledge production.

Grassroots and nonprofit initiatives already exemplify this alignment. Edmonton's Green Leagues program, for instance, demonstrates how community-driven renewable projects can cultivate local technical capacity and social cohesion.¹³⁸ Similar models that combining environmental education, mentorship, and

WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?



When Skills for Change set out to understand the experiences of women in Canada's skilled trades, we asked a deceptively simple question: what does it actually take for a woman to enter this sector, build a career, and thrive? What we found, over three years of surveying, convening, and listening, is both more complex and more actionable than any single statistic can capture.

Women are entering the trades in growing numbers and with real ambition as apprentices, as Red Seal holders, and as pre-apprentices poised to move forward. They arrive with strong values around collaboration, sustainability, and community, and frequently discover that those values are not what the workplace rewards. And many are still on the outside looking for a way in: only 27% of women from our survey interested in a skilled trades career describe themselves as very aware of opportunities, a gap that speaks to how much more work remains on outreach, visibility, and community connection. When we asked what would most help them take that step, 72% named mentorship first, seeing someone who looks like them, already in the field, still there. What we heard, in survey responses and in rooms full of tradeswomen across the country, is a story of capacity meeting barriers: the informal hiring networks that exclude those without connections, the worksite cultures that prize toughness and emotional stoicism while

devaluing the skills women bring, the absence of properly fitting PPE and women's washrooms, and the harassment that is too diffuse to easily document but corrosive enough that talented people leave before they complete certification.

For women who do get through the door, the challenges often intensify. We heard about the exhausting pressure of being told that your individual success or failure will determine whether any other women are hired. We heard about being assigned repetitive, low-responsibility tasks because of assumptions about physical capacity. We heard about workplaces with anti-discrimination policies on paper but no mandatory training to back them up. This included policies that lack clarity, do not address power imbalances, and are designed more for legal compliance than cultural change. We heard about the particular weight carried by racialized and immigrant women, who navigate language barriers, racial bias, and the absence of local networks on top of everything else, and who, despite all of this, showed up in our survey with some of the highest levels of commitment to the sector and to the green transition it needs to make.

What also emerged, and what we want to be clear about, is that the barriers women face are not uniform. Each region we convened in surfaced something distinct: in BC, the persistent gap between what women

actually bring to trades work and what employers still assume; in Manitoba, the systemic expectation that a single woman must represent her entire gender; in Ontario, the depth of the "All-Boys Club" and its reach into immigrant families' decisions about their children's futures; in Quebec, the psychological harassment that operates below the threshold of easy documentation; in Nova Scotia, a more connected community showing what becomes possible when trust between workers and employers is real. Designing for all of these women means designing with intersectionality from the start; not gender alone, but race, immigration status, language, geography, and caregiving responsibility together.

On the employer side, what we found was not indifference but constrained capacity. Employers told us they want to hire and support women, want to offer mentorship and career development, want to engage with the green economy. 87% of employers we surveyed do not provide women-specific leadership or mentorship programs. 71% do not offer green skills training, not because they do not care but because the speed of business, tight schedules, and thin margins leave little room for the structural work that inclusion requires. Employers like BC Infrastructure Benefits, Aecon Canada, and PCL Construction show what becomes possible when equity is built into how an organization operates; embedded in hiring, onboarding, mentorship, and advancement rather than added on as a side program. But many employers do not yet have that infrastructure, which is precisely why this is where partnerships between employers, community organizations, and government are not supplementary to workforce strategy. They are the strategy.

The WiST Leadership Academy demonstrated what becomes possible when that relational infrastructure is deliberately built. Peer learning, storytelling, and mentorship with women already in the sector consistently emerged as the most transformative elements, not because the curriculum was secondary, but because seeing someone who looks like you navigating what you are navigating, and still here, changes what you believe is possible. Among apprentices from underrepresented groups, 83% said they would not have succeeded without their mentor, and 92% said their mentor taught them things they would not have otherwise learned.¹³⁹ And the evidence from employers points to something beyond mentorship alone. As PCL Construction's approach illustrates, mentorship builds skills and connection, sponsorship moves careers, and for women to reach leadership, both are needed. And across our convenings, more than 1,200 people gathered to connect, build community, and push the conversation forward. In a sector where hiring, promotion, and sponsorship happen through informal networks, building those networks deliberately is itself a form of systems change.

Key Recommendations:

1. Move from counting women to changing conditions.

Participation is not inclusion. Programs that measure success only by job hire numbers will keep reproducing the same inequities. Success indicators must expand to include qualitative measures: workers' sense of belonging, perceived respect, access to advancement, and retention over time.

2. Invest in the relational infrastructure on which careers can be built.

Informal networks decide who gets hired, sponsored, and promoted. Structured convenings, mentorship programs, and leadership development pathways are not add-ons to workforce strategy. They are the strategy. Governments and funders should invest in them sustainably, not only as pilots.

3. Make gender-appropriate infrastructure a baseline requirement, not an optional accommodation.

Worksites must have women's washrooms. PPE must fit women's bodies. Harassment prevention and fair task distribution must be embedded in health and safety audits. These are minimum conditions for safety and dignity, not requests for special treatment. Anti-harassment policies must go further than compliance: formal harassment training should be mandatory, not optional, and policies must be paired with accountability mechanisms and genuine cultural transformation. This is because evidence consistently shows that policies alone, without enforcement and education, do not change workplace behaviour.

4. Embed equity into apprenticeship sponsorship.

Consortium and pooled sponsorship models, in which financial risk and training responsibility are shared across multiple employers, can open pathways that individual sponsorship closes. For newcomer and racialized women who lack local networks, this is not a technical fix but a structural one.

5. Address the scheduling and caregiving gap.

The mismatch between standard trade schedules and accessible childcare is not an abstraction. Flexible hours, employer-assisted childcare, and extended parental benefits framed as supports for all workers with caregiving responsibilities would begin to bring trades scheduling norms into alignment with how people actually live. The same goes for those caring for elderly family or others with complex medical needs.

6. Build meaningful partnerships between governments, employers, and nonprofits.

Employers want to do more and lack the capacity to do it alone. Nonprofits hold the relationships, trust, and equity-centred expertise that neither governments nor employers can replicate. Sustained, multi-year funding is what allows these partnerships to build rather than simply pilot.

7. Invest in green skills training as an equity strategy.

The women who want to be part of the green transition are already here. What is missing is the training infrastructure to connect their readiness to the sector's needs. Green competencies must be integrated into core apprenticeship curricula, not treated as optional credentials at the periphery, and accessible to the newcomer, racialized, and Indigenous women who have told us that this is exactly where they want to go.

8. Design with intersectionality, not just gender.

A gender lens that does not account for race, immigration status, language, and

geography will reach some women and miss others. Policy design, program delivery, and evaluation frameworks must be intersectional from the start.

9. Expand disaggregated data on retention and outcomes.

We cannot address what we cannot see. Longitudinal, disaggregated, and de-identified data, on who enters, who completes, who advances, and who leaves and why is essential infrastructure for evidence-based policymaking.

A Sector at a Turning Point

This report represents just some of the lives, decisions, and daily calculations of women connected to Canada's skilled trades sector. It also represents some of the employers wrestling with the gap between what they want to do and what they are resourced to do. And while we have presented lots of different information, quotes, and sources, the main question within this report is not, at its core, a workforce question. It is a question about the kind of Canada we are building, literally and figuratively, and who benefits from it. From the housing crisis to the green transition to equitable employment, if Canada's goal is an economy that meets the needs of everyone, then supporting women in the construction and manufacturing related skilled trades is a strategic choice that accelerates progress on all fronts.

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