

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.

CONTEXT



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 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 report is the seventh in a series of ten based on our national survey, augmented with data from other sources to build out a fuller picture of the skilled trades sector in Canada. In this issue, we offer you a brief snapshot of the WiST national events. Delivered through a partnership model, these events sparked meaningful conversations, expanded professional connections, deepened awareness of the challenges women encounter in skilled trades pathways, and offered an inclusive environment where women felt supported and their achievements recognized.

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WIST EVENTS AND CONVENINGS



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.³ 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.⁴ 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.

In our next report we discuss the Leadership Academy, but 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.⁵ Convenings also mobilize knowledge, linking individual experiences to broader structural change by facilitating dialogue among workers, unions, employers, training institutions, and policymakers.⁶ 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.

WiST 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.

THE STORY CONTINUES



Convening to create connection is an important part of systems change. In our next report we look more at the specifics of networking and mentorship, and the importance of women-specific programming.

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