

# 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.

Experiences in the Skilled Trades

# 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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 survey<sup>2</sup> 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 fourth 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 fourth issue, we offer you a brief snapshot of what we heard from women who are already in the skilled trades. For employers, government, trainers, and workforce development agencies, these insights are integral to understanding how to better support newcomer and racialized women and what concerns or fears about careers in the trades with which they are contending.

With each report, we will reveal more about what these employers want to be doing to support women but also what they are unable to do. What emerges is a compelling story: some employers are already working to create new ways of working to support women, and more have the desire to do so. 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.

[READ THE OTHER REPORTS](#)



# EXPERIENCES IN THE SKILLED TRADES



Since the launch of the CAS in 2019, the need for skilled trades<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> The shortage is exacerbated by restrictive zoning and land-use policies, an aging skilled trades workforce, and insufficient apprenticeship and training programs.<sup>5,6</sup> Over 700,000 skilled trades workers are projected to retire by 2030,<sup>7,8,9</sup> with construction alone needing over 300,000 new workers.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> With these myriad pressures continuing to compound, Canada is in crisis.

At present, women only make up 13% of skilled trades workers in Canada's construction and manufacturing sectors,<sup>12</sup> and only 2.4% of those are from racialized communities.<sup>13</sup> 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.

# WOMEN FROM THE SURVEY

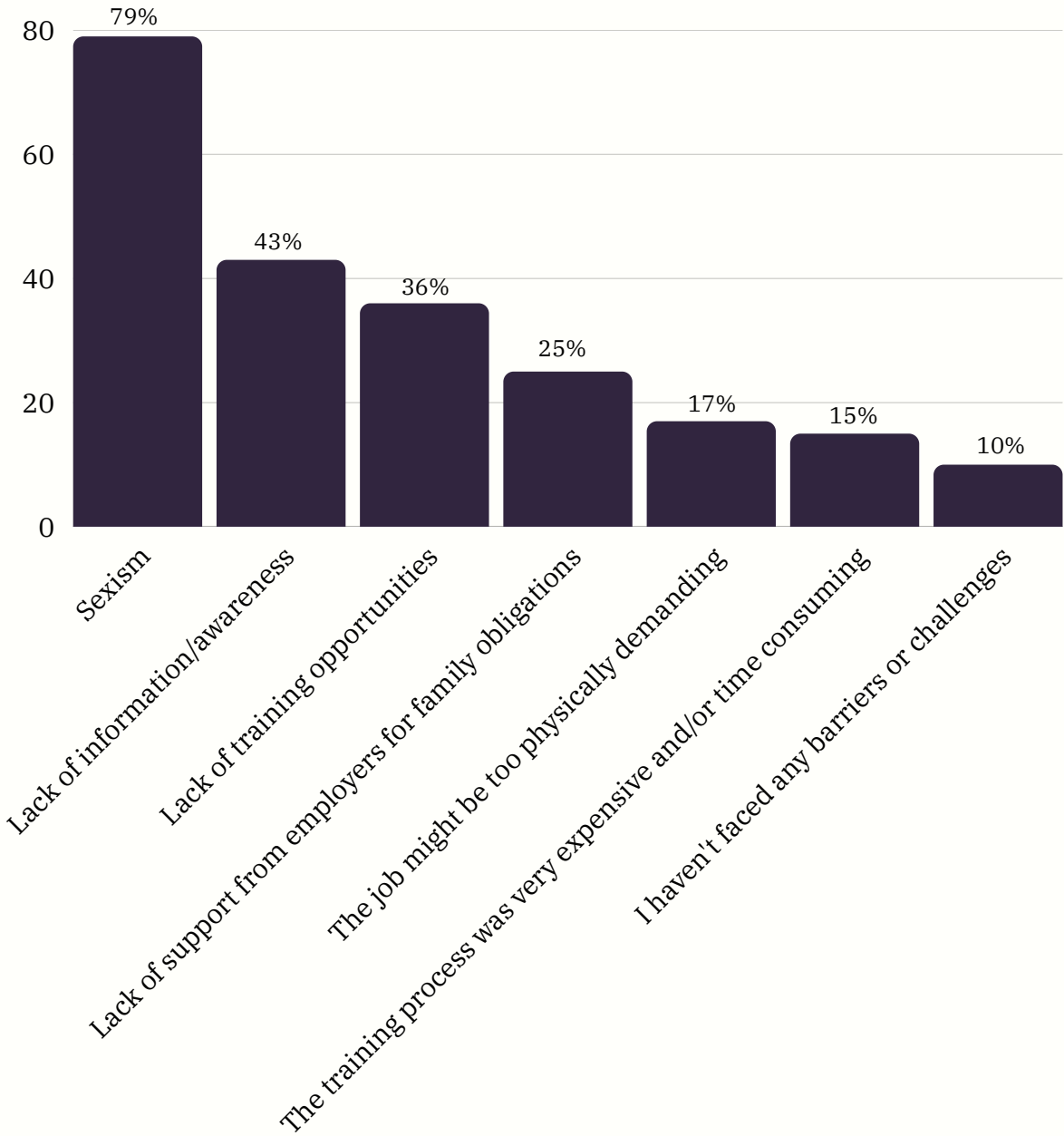


In the last report, we shared some insights into what women thinking about pursuing a career in the skilled trades (n=135) expect to encounter. Perhaps not surprising, 63% anticipate sexism in the workplace. But they also expect to come up against other barriers like a lack of training opportunities (50%) and told us that they currently have a lack of information or awareness about ways into skilled trades careers (47%). As well, 41% are worried that the job will be too physically demanding, training will be too expensive or time consuming, and that there will be a lack of support from employers for family obligations. And in an industry where 78.9% of workers are white,<sup>14</sup> 100% of Indigenous and 44% of racialized women respondents interested in a career in the skilled trades told us they expect to encounter racism.

In looking at our survey data, we asked the question: how do these 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



In our last report, 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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 insufficient<sup>17</sup>), 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.<sup>18</sup>
- Traditional approaches to harassment prevention, which are primarily for legal compliance, do not alter workplace attitudes or behaviours.<sup>19</sup>
- Policies often fail because they do not address power imbalances or reporting barriers.<sup>20</sup>

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 saw in the second report of this series, 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.

# THE STORY CONTUNUES



Our survey is just one tool for capturing both the perceptions and realities of careers for women in the skilled trades, and this first set of four reports have provided a snapshot of some of the issues plaguing the sector. But there remains more to say and more to explore. In the next report, we bring together a variety of studies and publications to stitch together a deeper understanding of issues like safety, work cultures, workplace accommodations, and gendered expectations.

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