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.

The Green Turn

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 survey[2] 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 ninth 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 perspectives of the women and employers regarding the “green turn” in the skilled trades.

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

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.[3,4] 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.[5,6] 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.[7] 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.[8] 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.[9]

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.[10] 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.[11] 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.[12]

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.[13] 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.[14] 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.[15] 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.[16] 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.[17]

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+[18] economies, empirical evidence shows a strong correlation between gender equality and reduced carbon emissions, suggesting that inclusive governance directly enhances environmental outcomes.[19]

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.[20] In the European Union, women in agriculture lead the adoption of sustainable practices by integrating environmental goals into entrepreneurship.[21] Yet despite these contributions, women remain underrepresented in key sectors driving climate action including renewable energy, sustainable construction, and environmental technology.[22] 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.[23]

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.

WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

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.[24] However, TDAs often operate within outdated frameworks that separate environmental competencies from core technical training.[25] 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.[26,27] Still, funding remains fragmented, and employers report difficulty in assessing the return on investment for green-specific training.

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.[28,29] 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.[30] Similar models that combining environmental education, mentorship, and 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.

THE STORY CONTINUES

The green transition in the skilled trades is not arriving to an indifferent workforce. Women in and around the sector are already oriented toward climate action and sustainability, already asking where the training is, and already imagining what a career built around environmentally responsible practice could look like. That readiness is a resource the sector has not yet fully met.

The gap between that readiness and what employers are currently offering in terms of green skills training is one of the more concrete tensions this report surfaces. It points not to a lack of will on either side, but to a structural lag that thoughtful investment in curriculum, training delivery, and employer capacity could begin to close. And for women who have told us that a connection to climate action adds meaning and purpose to their career aspirations, closing that gap is not only a workforce development question. It is also one of equity.

This brings us to the final report in the series. Drawing together the threads from all nine reports, from who women in the trades are and what they have experienced, to what employers are doing and where the sector is heading, the final issue offers a synthesis of the evidence gathered through the WiST initiative and turns toward what it collectively points to in terms of policy directions and pathways forward.

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Title: From Entry to Leadership: Women's Careers in the Skilled Trades
Publication Date: February 2026

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This publication was developed with the support of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to assist in research and information gathering. However, all writing, editing, design, and final content decisions were made by human contributors.

The survey was designed in consultation with a national advisory committee, with representatives in British Columbia, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba. The survey was circulated digitally through the WIST network via newsletters and social media, as well as at in-person events, and was open from April 2025 to November 2025. The survey sample is not representative.