

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 eighth 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 Leadership Academy, a program designed to offer mentorship, career guidance, and leadership training to help women advance their career aspirations. Through this program, participants were introduced to other women in the trades and provided a space where they could share success stories, create professional networks, and develop community.

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](#)



THE WIST LEADERSHIP ACADEMY



Throughout our events in BC, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia, we heard time and time again the importance of networks. We've reported several times in this series 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.

But as we shared in our second report, 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.

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

Strong mentorship would really help me take the next step.

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.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?



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.

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 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.

THE STORY CONTINUES



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?

REFERENCES



1. Government of Canada, “Apply for funding for the Women in the Skilled Trades Initiative under the Canadian Apprenticeship Strategy.” December 1, 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/funding/women-skilled-trades-initiative.html>.
2. Survey data for these reports were accessed on January 12, 2026.



Building Welcoming and Equitable Communities

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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.