

# 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.”<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 first 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 first issue, we offer you a brief snapshot of the women that participated in our survey to situate the rest of the reports to come. With each report we will reveal more about their perspectives and experiences, weave in practices from employers who are working to create pathways for women, and stitch together research from a variety of sources to better understand ways forward. 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.

[READ THE OTHER REPORTS](#)



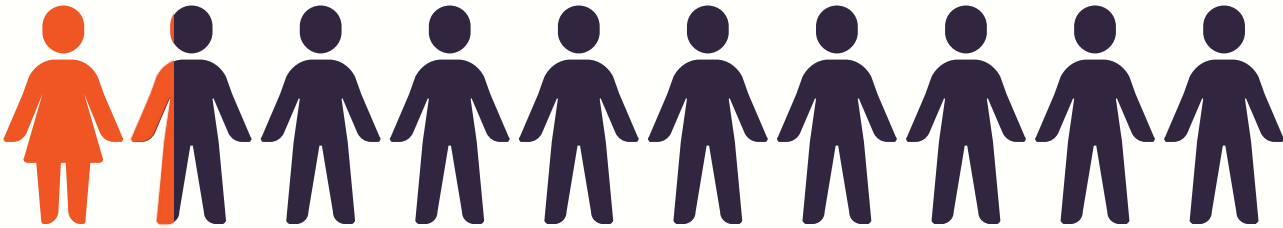
# A PROFILE OF WOMEN IN CANADA'S SKILLED TRADES SECTOR



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.

There is, however, a solution.

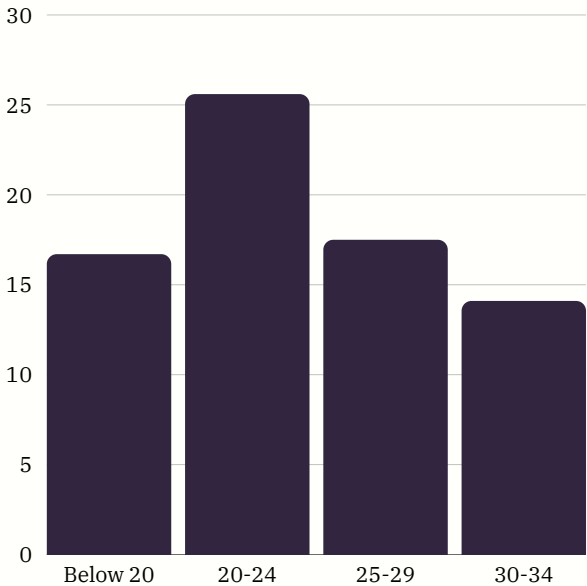
Women are drastically underrepresented in the skilled trades, accounting for just 13.7% of apprentices—a number that is even lower for immigrant and racialized women. Creating better conditions for women to enter into and remain in the trades is paramount for both addressing the labour shortage and sustaining Canada's economy.



*Only 13.7% of all skilled trades apprentices are women.*

In 2024, only 7.9% of workers in trades, transport, and equipment operator occupations were women.<sup>12</sup> And in the construction and manufacturing skilled trades sector, men make up 87% of workers.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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

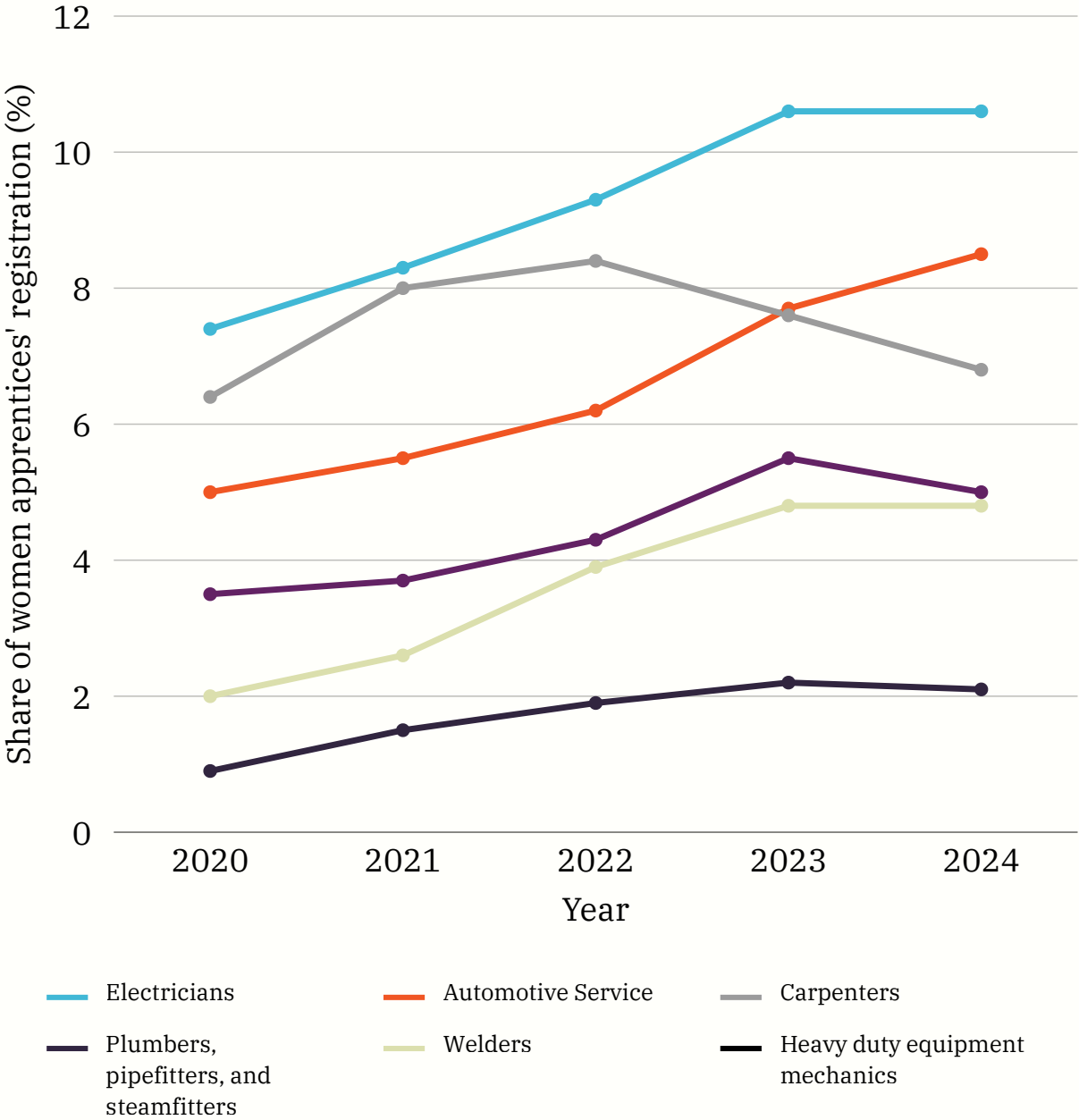
And the under-20 age group showed the largest year-over-year increase of over 24%.<sup>15</sup>

Trade specialization patterns also reveal persistent gender segmentation. Men 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).<sup>16</sup> These sectors are historically women-dominated, with women comprising approximately 85% of the workforce.<sup>17</sup>



## 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>



*Growing Share of Women Choosing Male-Dominated Skilled Trades, 2020–2024.<sup>20</sup>*



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%).

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%).

**32%**

are from 2SLGBTQIA+ communities

**19%**

are racialized

**15%**

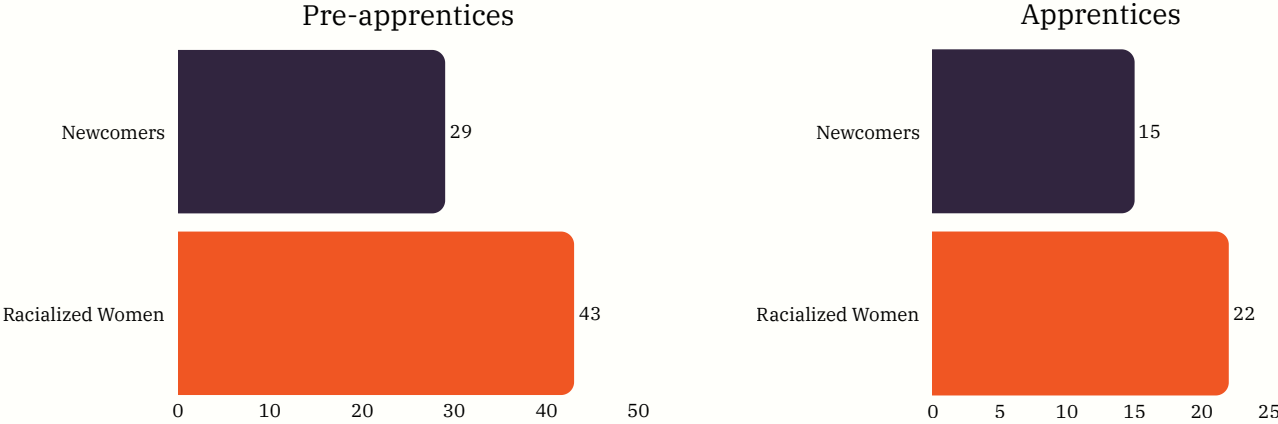
are Indigenous

**12%**

are newcomers

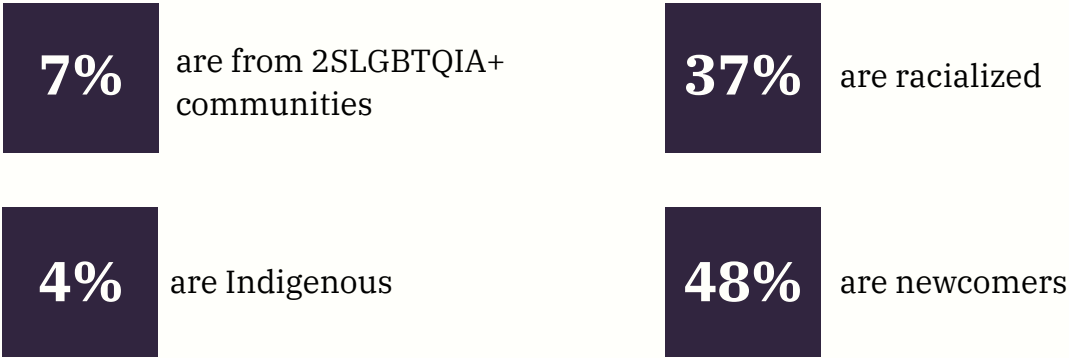
*Demographics of respondents who are currently employed.*

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.




*From our respondent group, we can see a larger cohort of newcomer and racialized women in pre-apprenticeships than current apprentices, suggesting a future increase of both newcomer and racialized women in the skilled trades sector.*

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).



*Demographics of respondents who are interested in working in trades.*

# 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

In the third report of this series, we look more closely at these concerns by turning to the women from our survey who are already in the sector to hear what they have encountered and explore how perception aligns, or does not align, with reality.

# WHY THESE FIGURES ARE IMPORTANT



The statistics in this report 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.<sup>21,22</sup> 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.

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For more information, contact:

[research@skillsforchange.org](mailto:research@skillsforchange.org)

[www.skillsforchange.org/research](http://www.skillsforchange.org/research)

791 St. Clair Avenue West

Toronto, ON

M6C 1B7

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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.