

# 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.

A Profile of Employers in Canada's Skilled Trades Sector

# MESSAGE FROM THE CEO



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 second 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 second issue, we offer you a brief snapshot of the employers that participated in our survey to situate the rest of the reports to come. 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.

Surranna Sandy  
Chief Executive Officer

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



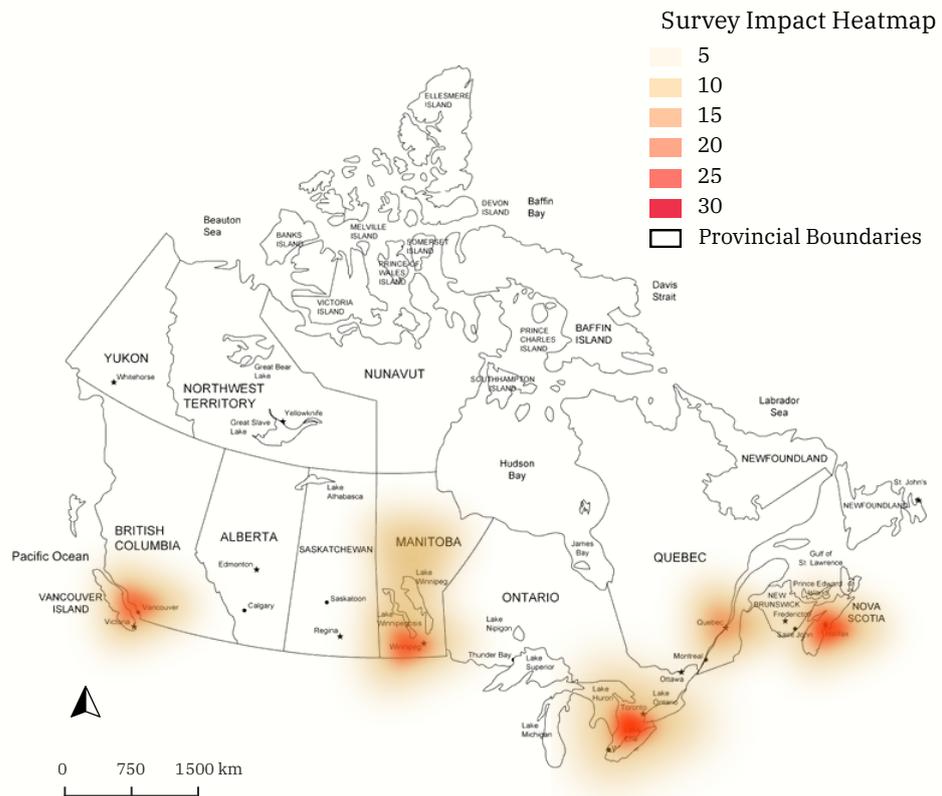
Since the launch of the CAS in 2019, the need for skilled trades<sup>3</sup> workers has only increased. A national housing crisis and an aging workforce are driving an urgent demand for labour. Canada faces a severe housing shortage, with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) estimating 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.

Employers are, of course, a vital part of any solution to labour issues. In the construction and manufacturing sectors, there are over 150,000 businesses across Canada that employ over 3.3 million workers, representing almost 16% of the national GDP.<sup>12,13,14</sup> And where government strategies prioritize training to bring more people into skilled trades occupations, employers play a dual role in supporting apprentices as part of that entry strategy while also helping to ensure career longevity and employee retention.

Through the WiST advisory committee and during discussions at events across the country, there was much discussion about the ongoing challenges employers face in recruiting and retaining women in the trades. Many employers are aware of “best practices,” including gender-inclusive recruitment, mentorship supports, career advancement, and networking supports that can strengthen hiring outcomes, job satisfaction, and long-term retention for women. But they often lack the tools, capacity, and resources needed to drive deeper, systemic change. While they acknowledge that progress remains uneven, they are committed to being more inclusive and supportive.



Our survey gives us a quick look at part of the sector’s operational landscape. A total of 165 employers responded from Ontario (25%), Nova Scotia (24%), Manitoba (18%), British Columbia (17%), and Quebec (16%).



### Survey Response Heatmap (Employers) - Canada

Areas with survey responses (FSA-level), 2025, N=165 respondents

Source: Skills for Change, National Project: Women in Skilled Trades, Survey of Employer, 2025.

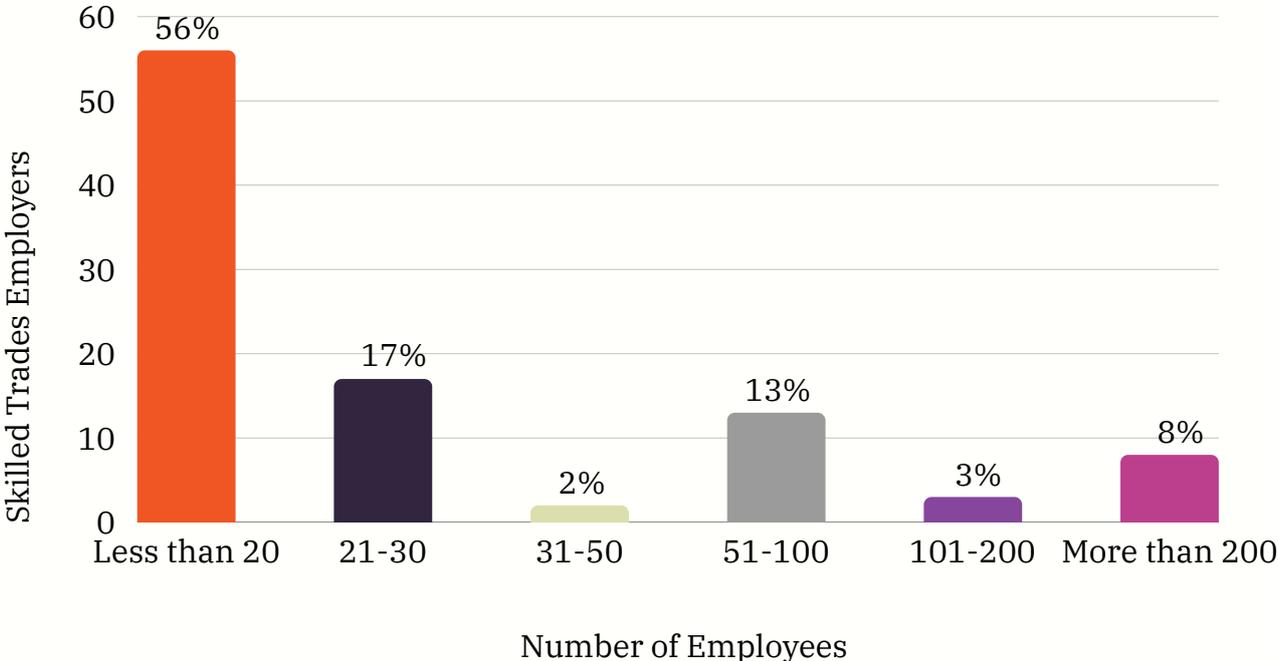
Note: Heat intensity represents approximate concentration of survey responses at the FSA (3-digit postal code) level, not individual addresses.

We asked employers questions about two key areas of their operations to better understand where they can focus their efforts to not only attract but also be better at retaining women:

- Hiring and retention practices
- Support for career advancement and networking

What we can see is that while overall there is a desire to do more to support women, it's much more complicated than simply providing training and job placements.

Knowing that small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are a major employer in the sector, our survey was more granular in terms of the size of company than most other reports. And yet it might still be surprising that 56% of our respondents have fewer than 20 employees. This can be important when thinking about the capacity of employers to hire apprentices of any gender and the culture of a given workplace.

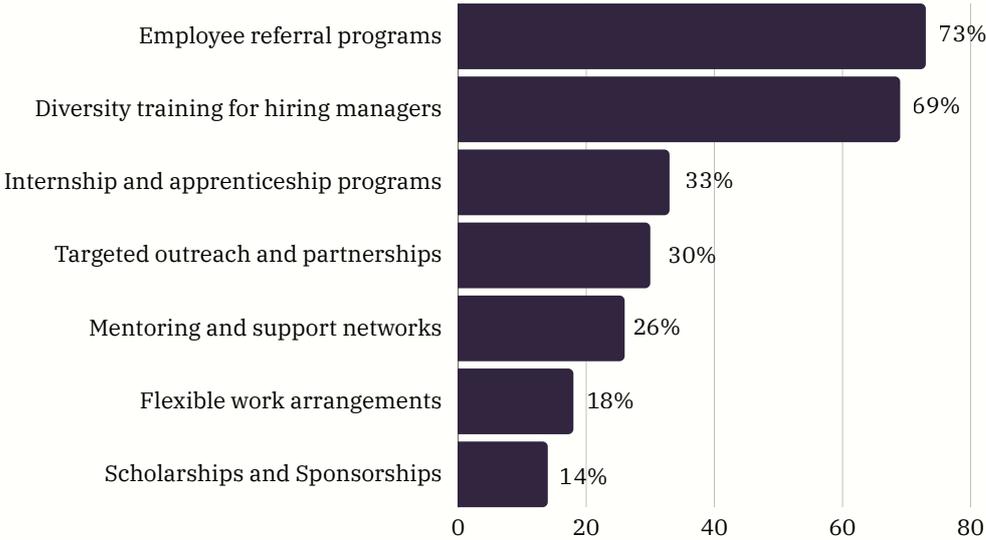


In our previous report, we identified some perceived barriers that women interested in a career in trades think they might encounter, including sexism and racism (which we explore more in the next two issues of this series). In work environments with smaller teams, this can mean that negative workplace dynamics might be difficult to evade. And in the context of apprenticeships, in certain trades an employer is required to have a 1:1 journeyman-to-apprentice ratio,<sup>15</sup> limiting the number of new apprentices they can hire and train.

# MAKING THE PITCH



When asked what strategies employers use to recruit women, especially racialized and immigrant women, respondents showed a range of approaches.



These responses tell us two things: there indeed are employers that are working to diversify their workforce—and the work they are doing needs to be amplified—but others are not yet following suit. This could be for several reasons such as establishing connections with communities not yet in your network is difficult work. Where do you start?

This is where partnerships between employers and community-based organizations are essential.

Hiring in the trades often happens through informal networks,<sup>16,17</sup> and in a sector so heavily populated by men this raises questions about the ability of women to find entry points into the sector. But are skilled trades employers really in a position to be able to hold networking events and advancing this kind of support?

*It has been challenging to provide the time for employees to engage in formal and organized networking opportunities as there is always work to do and prioritize in addition to location challenges where these opportunities occur.*

*We want to create networking opportunities for all our staff, not just the women, but with crews spread across job sites and deadlines always looming, formal events just aren't practical right now.*

*We'd like to help women build networks, but honestly, between tight schedules and remote job sites, organizing formal events just isn't realistic for us.*

Without sufficient access to networks, women can be left with a lack of role models and mentors. And although the trades have a built-in mentorship-style structure via apprenticeship, 87% of employers stated that they do not provide specific leadership training or mentorship programs.

*We are a small, growing company and do not have enough funds to provide leadership and/or mentorship programs, let alone specifically for women.*

*I am unsure if my company provides opportunities for leadership training that are specifically designed for women in trades, but I think it would be helpful in bringing more women into trades.*

*We have some workshops and such. These could be better.*

And while government strategies focus heavily on pathways for women into the skilled trades, which help to address the sector's heavy reliance on informal networks, ensuring that women stay in the trades needs different, and in some ways more focused, attention. One important way of encouraging women to remain in the trades is supporting their career advancement. However, 65% of employers in our survey do not provide opportunities to learn about career advancement to any employees, let alone opportunities tailored for women. 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.*

We know, though, that many employers are also committed to figuring out how they can better support women.

*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.*

*We are looking into partnership opportunities to make [leadership and/or mentorship programs] a reality. I strongly believe delivering training and programs would definitely help retain our women employees and bring more women into our organization.*

*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.*

# WHY ARE THESE NARRATIVES IMPORTANT?



Employers are telling us that they want to attract and support women in joining the trades and having long, successful careers. But they're also telling us that the speed of business doesn't typically allow for this. Realistically, how much time can employers carve out of the workday when they have deadlines and deliverables to meet in order to run their business?

This is where Canada's nonprofit sector plays a vital role. In partnering with employers, and bringing government into these partnerships, nonprofits are uniquely positioned to help employers create supports for women's entry into, and retention in, the skilled trades.

# THE STORY CONTINUES



But what does all this mean for women, who have long been considered “not cut out” for the skilled trades? Having looked at who our employer respondents are and some of the ways they’re working, or unable to work, towards better supporting women, the next report will return to some insights we briefly mentioned in the last report: perceptions about the trades from women interested in exploring a skilled trades career.

## **Perceptions of the Skilled Trades**

What do women think they’ll encounter if they pursue a career in the skilled trades? Understanding perception is key for knowing how to create pathways.

## **Experiences in the Skilled Trades**

We compare perceptions and realities to track women’s concerns and document their experiences.

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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.